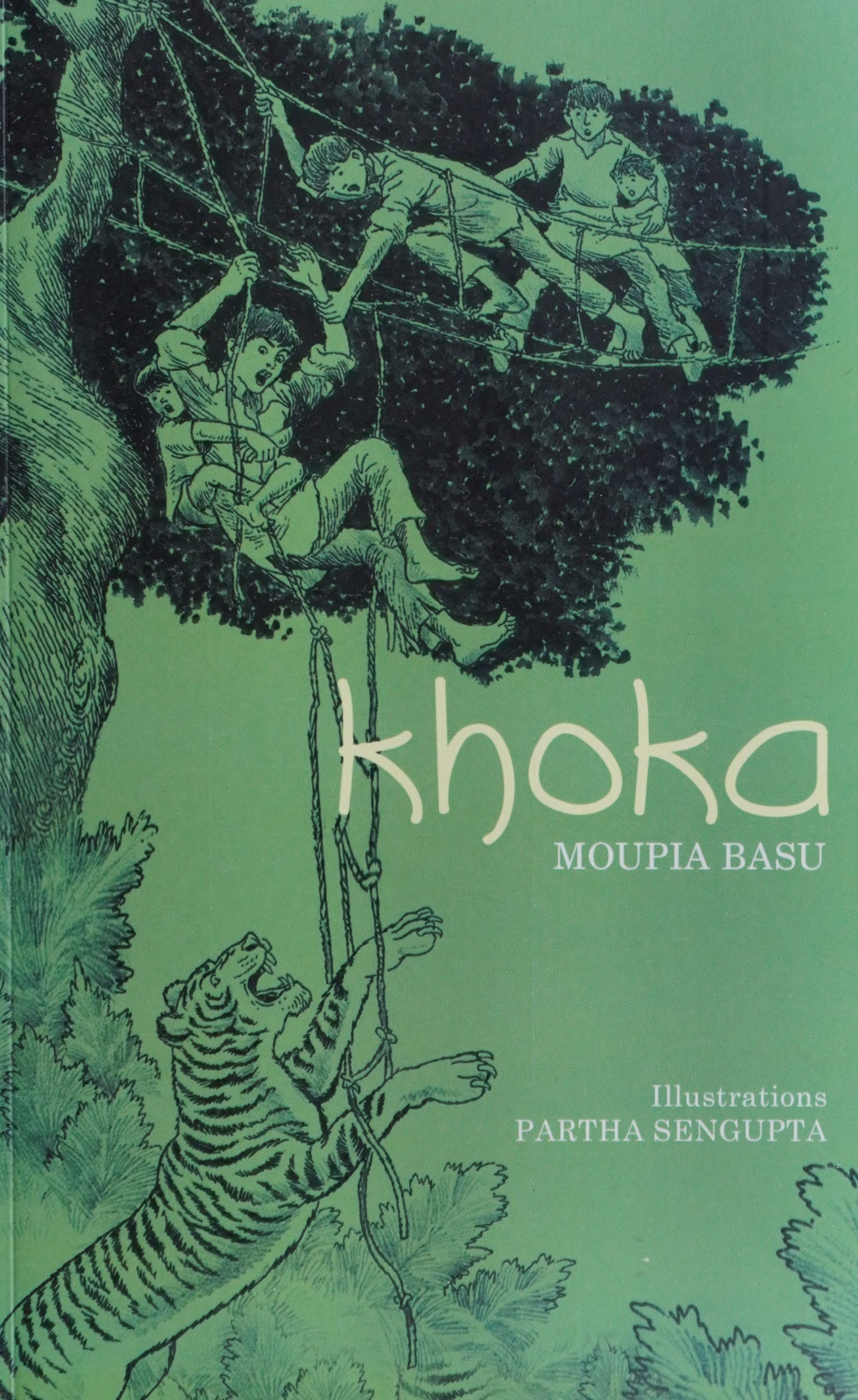

khoka

MOUPIA BASU

Illustrations
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Born and brought up in Delhi in the '70s and '80s, **Moupia Basu** acquired post graduation in English Literature from St. Stephen's College of Delhi University. Her numerous stints as a journalist in the top publications of the country as well as being married to an army officer helped her understand India better as a country. Khoka, helped her to re-discover her past. Moupia lives in Pune and continues to marvel at the wonder that is India.

Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

Khoka

Moupia Basu

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Partha Sengupta

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Preface

I still remember those lazy summer afternoons when not a leaf stirred and the cuckoo would call out occasionally. School was closed for summer vacation and I would lie beside my father and pester him to tell me stories from his days in the Chhota Nagpur Plateau where he grew up with a host of cousins and uncles and aunts, after his father died when he was three. There were stories and stories about fun and frolic, about friends and cousins, about mountains and rivers. My father was named Khoka. The name Khoka is an endearment used by a mother for her son as much as being symbolic of love, affection, expectation and inspiration.

Whenever I would recall those stories, my heart would miss a beat and I yearned for all that I missed as a city-bred girl. In the madness of modern, urban life, I had missed out on the simple joys of life. As I watch my little son play with his remote-controlled car, I feel sad. Would he never know the joy of climbing trees and pluck fruits? Would he never go on a secret rendezvous with his cousins? Would he never understand his forefathers' frenzied bursts of nationalism? It was important that he knew what life had been those many years ago.

Although Khoka is the chief protagonist in this story, Prahlad is equally important in the context of the

contrast projected between the two boys. They are set apart by 50 years, an entire era, Prahlad born at the end of the 20th century, and Khoka who grew up in the first half of it, at a time when both the nation and the world were engaged in their own respective battles for freedom. While Prahlad lives in a fast-paced, practical world, Khoka's world is more imaginative one, which makes allowances for open spaces and moves at a more leisured pace. Both the stories run parallel to each other. For the benefit of the reader the current story of Prahlad has been italicized and that of Khoka has been set in Roman.

The story has a universal relevance, applicable to the adult world of today. It reconnects with the past and revives memories of an era crucial in the history of our country, and one which determined the future of the nation and the individual, both of which are inextricably linked with one another. Those were tense times, decisive times, yet filled with confidence and hope. The nation's aspirations lay in its people, especially the children who having been witness to the struggles would naturally understand the need to not only cherish, but also carry forward the legacy left behind by a tortured generation.

September 2015 **Moupia Basu**

1

"Mom, I want to change my name!" announced Prahlad one day.

"Why? What's wrong with your name?" Malati mumbled absent-mindedly, not taking her eyes off the P.G.Wodehouse classic she was reading. Feeling his impatience as he stood there, she turned her attention to her son.

"It's a tongue-twister and a mouthful. Besides, it's so old-fashioned. Why can't I have some name like Bob or Sid or even Ron? And since I can't change my surname, which is a pity, I want to change at least my first name. Prahlad Pilgaonkar! What a name!" He snorted before walking away.

Malati sighed helplessly at Prahlad's receding figure. This was a new one. Every now and then Prahlad came up with some outlandish idea or demand. Sometimes he gave in to reasoning and at other times it was war between mother and son.

Her husband Rohit was not too worried. "He's growing up and there are too many changes happening to him and around him. It wouldn't have been normal if he didn't get such strange ideas. Have you ever thought about the fact that nothing would have been invented in this world had it not been for strange ideas? Don't worry too much about Prahlad. He's growing up just fine."

Malati sighed. She wished she could be as relaxed about her son as Rohit was. Prahlad would be fourteen in a month's time. He was a bright and intelligent boy. Maybe that was

why he got these funny ideas. Of course he was stubborn when he wanted to be, but he was also affectionate and responsible. If it is not his name, it would be his school, the environment, the roads—in short, anything that would be bothering him.

"Wake up Mom, time for school."

Malati turned on her side and blinked.

"Really? But it's still dark," she said reaching out for the clock and peering into it. It was 3 a.m.

"Prahlad, it's only three. Go back to bed. I'll wake you up when it is time."

But, Prahlad had made his mind up. He threw away his blanket and jumped off the bed. "I'm going to school."

Malati had to get out of bed, knowing it was no use reasoning with him.

She made herself a cup of tea. Prahlad was in the bathroom, talking to Batman, his best friend, who was going to accompany him to school for moral support that first day. It was not just Batman who was his friend, but also Hanuman, whose exploits thrilled him. He never tired of listening to the story of Hanuman, sometimes asking his mother to replay a story many times during the day.

That first day, Prahlad was ready at six whereas the school started at nine. It had been the first and last time that he willingly got ready for school, though. From the very next day the tantrums had begun and slowly the delay in reaching school went from ten to twenty minutes and soon the five day school week became a three day one, with excuses and tantrums. It was a chore to push him to school.

Malati wondered about the genes that she had so proudly proclaimed he had inherited. Maybe a story would wake them up. She had gone into her room and from under the pile of clothes, had retrieved the blue diary. It had been a long while since she had read it. She started turning over the pages. A

musty smell emanated from the yellowed pages. It was a whiff of the past; the scent of a bygone era.

'Prahlad, come here!' she called out. The little boy came bounding up to her.

"Do you want to listen to a story?"

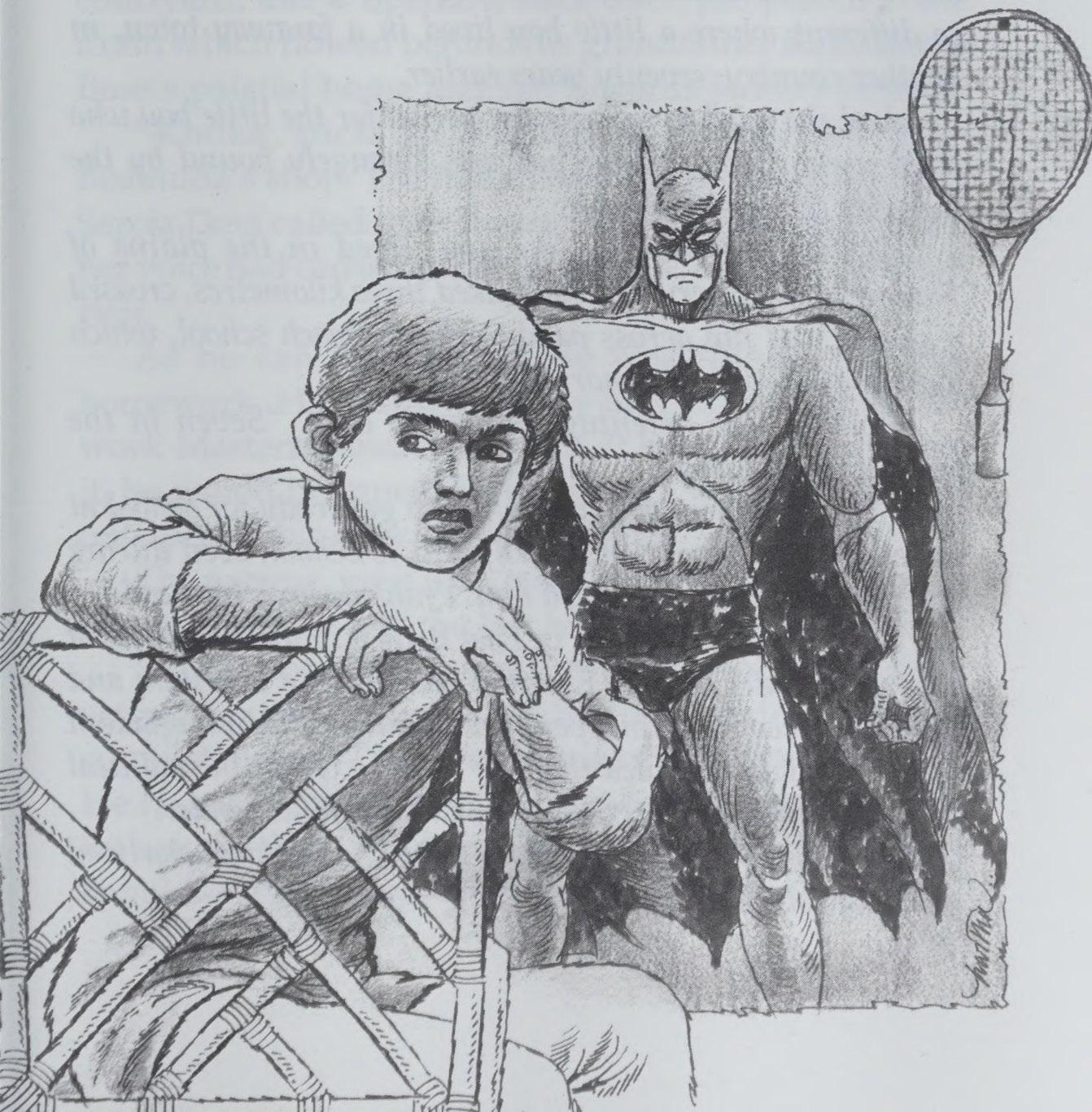
"Which one? Batman or Hanuman, or some other," asked the boy."

"None of those. It's about Khoka," Malati smiled.

"Who is Khoka?"

"A little boy like you, who lived many years ago. Ready?"

Prahlad nodded.



Malati reopened the diary and started telling him the first of the many stories Prahlad would hear over the years. Initially she narrated the stories and later began reading them out aloud. As he grew older, Prahlad began reading himself. It became a habit. The blue diary came out whenever he became stubborn, sad or confused.

As for Malati, every time she opened the book, she went back in time. She could hear the rustle of the coconut palms and the gurgle of the rivers. Smell the fragrance of the moist earth, and see in the silver light of the full moon, the paddy fields ripple as the night breeze swept across. In the mellow February sunshine outside the window it was not the bustling metro of Hyderabad, but the coming alive of a period that was so different where a little boy lived in a faraway town, in another country, seventy years earlier.

And she tried to recreate the period for the little boy who lived many decades later but was strangely bound by the invisible threads of the past.

"Khoka, a little boy like you, lived in the plains of Narayanganj. Every day, he walked three kilometres, crossed a stream and ran across paddy fields to reach school, which started at seven in the morning.

Prahlad was listening with wide eyes. "Seven in the morning, Mamma?"

"Yes! And here you are crying to get ready for school at nine! Do you know that Khoka went to school, even during the rainy season?" she asked him. Prahlad shook his head.

Narayanganj had been in East Bengal in undivided India and which later became East Pakistan during Partition and still later became an independent country called Bangladesh in 1971. Malati decided that she would explain the political division of the country when Prahlad was a little older.

For now it was sufficient for him to know that Khoka lived in a city called Narayanganj.

2

It was raining that Sunday when Khoka suddenly remembered that his Arithmetic notebook was with Jadoo. He was supposed to have returned it, but had not. And Khoka had some work to complete in it. He had to get it back right away! Khoka raced across the courtyard, threw open the back door, jumped over the drain which flowed behind his grandfather Kallicharan Bose's palatial home and ran towards Jadoo's house.

"Khoka, pick up a kilogram of *batashas* from Bishnuda's shop. Tell him to add it to the monthly list." Saroja Devi called after the vanishing figure and hoped her voice had carried to him over the sound of the pelting rain.

As he ran in the rain, he was thinking of the homework. He hardly had any time now to finish the work Mastermoshai had given. If he did not complete it, he would be caned. So far, Khoka was probably the only one in his class to have escaped it so far.

The narrow, mud road was slippery and slushy with the incessant rain of the last hour.

"My slippers are ruined," thought Khoka. Made of coarse leather, they were his only pair and were completely wet. They were already frayed at the edges. He had told his mother, but she had admonished him by saying that they were just a year-old and that he should use his things more carefully.

"But, Ma, I wear them day and night. The soles have worn away. Can't I get another pair for school?"

"Who do you think you are that you need more than one pair of footwear? One pair for school, indeed! Be thankful for what you have and stop wanting more."

Khoka never asked for a second pair after that conversation several months ago. He had been careful with them since then and always took them off and went barefoot in the rain. But that day he had forgotten to take them off in his anxiety about getting his notebook from Jadoo.

Jadoo's house was not very far—maybe a kilometre or so away—but somehow that day, the distance seemed greater.

Suddenly there was a bolt of thunder. He looked up at the sky. The rain didn't look as if it would stop any time soon.

'Let me take them off at least now,' he thought and holding them in his hand, he walked with his feet splashing in the muddy waters. He liked this very much, but if he fell ill he wouldn't be allowed to go to school the next day. And he couldn't bear that since missing school was unthinkable for him!

He remembered the last time he was ill and had been forced to miss school.

"Ma, please let me go to school, I'm fine," he had begged.

"No, you are not," Labonya had replied firmly, as she wrapped a blanket around him. "In any case, you won't miss too much of your studies in one day."

"Of course I will!" Khoka had replied agitatedly. "You have no idea of all the interesting things we learn—Newton and falling apples, of man's first flight

in the skies and so much more. Why, last week we recited some of Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Meghnad Badh Kavya*." He recited the lines for his mother.

He liked to recite English poetry too. If he could not get his mother and sister to listen, he would deliver the lines theatrically to the furniture in the room as the silent audience.

"Half a league, half a league, half a league onwards. Into the valley of death, rode the six hundred." He would chant the famous lines from Tennyson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, as he pulled at the imaginary reins of an imaginary horse. Or, he would spout a few lines from Wordsworth's *Daffodils* imagining himself amidst the flowers.

It was not just poetry that Khoka loved to recite. He also fancied himself to be the characters he read about, and tried to act like them. Sometimes these had unexpected results.

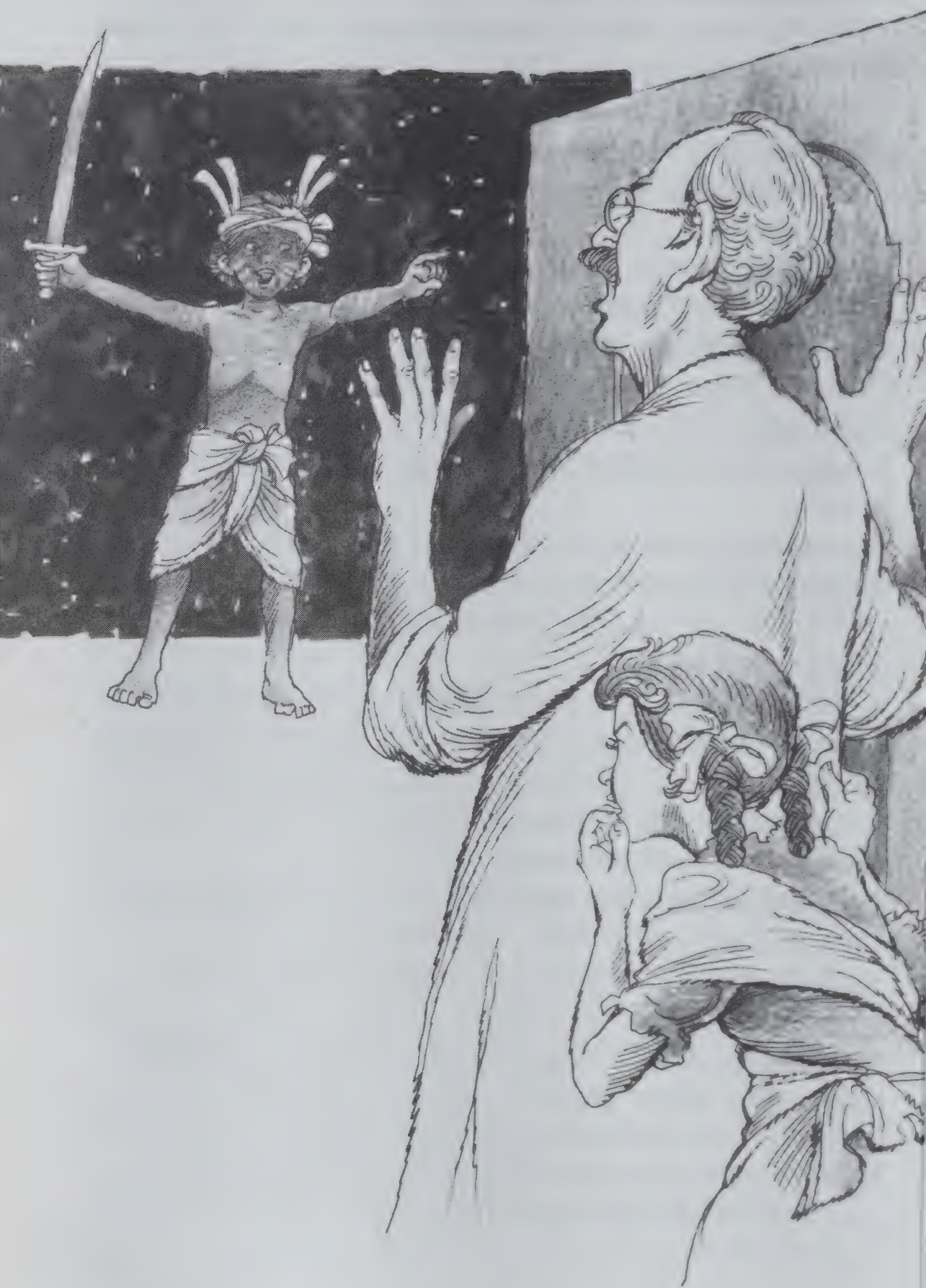
One day his elder sister Khuki had walked into the room unexpectedly and rushed out screaming her head off. She bumped into her grandfather outside the door.

"What is it Khuki? Have you seen a ghost back there?" he asked amusedly.

"Dadu, it doesn't look like one, but it's something strange and scary alright," she replied.

Grandfather frowned and entered the room and even he was momentarily shaken. He was confronted by something resembling a human figure, completely black save some white on what looked like the face sporting a headgear that would have put even the Red Indians to shame. Grandfather hid a smile.

"Who are you? Where do you come from?" he asked in mock fear.



"I live here. This land belongs to me and my tribe. Go away from here!" the apparition replied, adding in a whisper as if there was an audience. "Now, pretend you are Vasco da Gama."

Grandfather played along. "I'm Vasco da Gama. This land belongs to me, now since I've set foot upon it," he said.

At that, the little figure rushed at the old man, brandishing a cardboard sword and emitting a war cry which would have put a puppy to shame! Grandfather and grandson fought a terrible battle for a while at the end of which Vasco da Gama had overpowered the little native.

Khoka burst into tears. "I live here. How can you come and take over my land? You are a foreigner. This is my *Bharat Borsho*. Go away, Vasco da Gama."

"Okay, I'll go, but on one condition. You will never again finish off my ink," Kallicharan Bose had replied with suppressed laughter as he swept the little boy into his arms.

Sherlock Holmes and Hemendra Kumar Roy's detective stories inspired him to play the sleuth in real life whenever some mystery had to be solved in their house.

The first time he solved a mystery of the 'Vanishing Walking Stick' of their cantankerous neighbour Nobin Babu who had come to their house on a visit. Drinking cups of tea and demolishing several *pakodas*, Nobin Babu recounted the neighbourhood gossip. Finally when he got up to leave, he found his walking stick missing.

"I had kept it right here, next to me by the door. It was the best and most expensive walking stick in the whole of Narayanganj!" he lamented.

All the children had mysteriously gravitated towards the place. "Maybe, it walked away," one of them said. There was muffled giggling. Kallicharan Bose looked at them sternly and they suddenly began inspecting their toes with fierce concentration.

"I could never have imagined my walking stick to be stolen in your house, Bose Babu," Nobin Babu's tone was suddenly accusatory. It was enough that Kallicharan Bose had to listen to Nobin Babu for an hour without being accused of harbouring a thief in this house. He was understandably agitated.

"Is this the one?" Khoka suddenly produced the stick.

Nobin Babu practically snatched it from the boy's hand and immediately left the house without as much as a thank you.

"Who had hidden it?" Grandfather had asked after his departure. He was still irritated.

Fully knowing the consequences of his answer, Khoka had replied simply, "Nobody hid it, Dadu. It had fallen inside the room and since the room was dark, no one saw it."

Grandfather bought his answer and walked away, dismissing the matter with a wave of his hand. Khoka let out his breath, scarcely being aware that he had been holding it all the while.

The moment his grandfather left the room, he accosted Nandu. "Why did you hide it?"

Nandu was surprised that he had been caught out, but was unrepentant.

"I thought I'll teach him a lesson. He hates us kids and is always shooing us away as though we are pests. I know how much he loves that walking stick of his and so . . . ." Nandu had replied.

Khoka let it go at that. But at another time when a basketful of mangoes had gone missing, he would not let the culprit go so easily. It was Nandu once again.

"Put the mangoes right back or I'll tell everyone."

"Go and tell, you tell-tale! Always trying to please the elders by sneaking on us." Nandu had retorted, but had put the mangoes back.

The elders in the household loved Khoka. And, this did not always go down well with his cousins. Yet, life without Khoka was unimaginable for the children. He was always full of fun and surprises and at the centre of all mischief, but took great care not to antagonise the elders.

Although young, Khoka knew that he was different from his cousins. He had lost his father. His mother Labonya ensured that he was grateful towards his uncles and aunts who never let him feel the loss. Khoka, a good natured child, was always ready to help anyone who might need it, whether it was to help his cousins with their studies, do household chores, or run errands for his aunts and uncles. He also learned to value every single thing in his life, the love bestowed on him, the security offered by the loving joint family, and the few possessions of his including his slippers.

Khoka had nearly reached home after having recovered his precious notebook, when he remembered the *batashas*. Those crunchy round sweets which were normally offered to the gods daily in almost all Bengali households. He spun around on his heels and sprinted towards the local market. Bishnuda was closing the shop as he reached it panting. He told the shopkeeper to put the purchase on the monthly account and ran back home with the bag of sweets.

Dripping water all the way into the house, he handed the packet to his aunt. When his mother saw him, dripping wet, clothes spattered with mud, his shirt clinging to his narrow frame, she was horrified.

"Where on earth have you been at this hour and in this weather?" she demanded angrily.

"I went to get my notebook from Jadoo. I need the notebook for school tomorrow . . . ." he replied sheepishly.

"Were they so important that you had to get wet in the rain? And, where are your slippers?" she continued in the same tone.

"My slippers . . . ," Khoka's voice trailed off as he looked at his empty hands. He could have sworn that he had them with him. Did he drop them somewhere on the way? Without replying his mother, he turned on his heels and was gone to retrieve his only pair of slippers. As his eyes looked for them in the gloom of the evening, he understood that they were lost, carried away perhaps by the gushing rainwater.

The next day, Khoka could not go to school, barefoot or otherwise, as he was in bed with a raging fever. He had got a proper scolding from his mother the previous night for being careless and losing his slippers. And that day he was depressed because he could not go to school. The day seemed interminably long as he lay restless with fever and boredom.

The next day, Khoka got up earlier than usual, weak but ready for school. He wouldn't stay back another day. He went out of the room on tip-toe, so as not to wake up his mother and sister and crossed the inner courtyard to go to the bathroom.

"Khoka, come here!" Khoka jumped. It was the

unmistakable voice of his grandfather, who woke up well before dawn to meditate and then go through the details of the current case he was fighting in court. Khoka quietly went inside.

"So, you lost your slippers last evening!" Kallicharan Bose asked. Khoka nodded, surprised that his grandfather knew!

"You should not have gone out in the rain." His voice was stern and commanding. Khoka stood quietly. "Was the Arithmetic book so important?"

Khoka nodded. "Yes, it was, Dadu. I needed to complete the problems in it," Khoka answered in a rush.

"Hmm . . . . Stay at home today also and take rest. You will be well enough to go tomorrow," ordered his grandfather.

Khoka's face fell. He could not stay back another day! He was silent.

Kallicharan Bose looked at the thin figure framing the doorway. He rose and walked up to his nine-year-old grandson, with a packet in hand.

"You are my only grandchild who prefers school to home. May Ma Saraswati bless you with infinite wisdom," he said, handing Khoka the packet and stroking his head affectionately. "This is for you." He went back to his table. Khoka was dismissed.

He stood there for a while with the packet in hand, and then quietly walked out of his grandfather's study. The moment he came out, he opened the packet. There was a pair of slippers in it. Khoka couldn't believe his eyes.

He slid his feet into them. They fit him perfectly. He went right back into his grandfather's room. The old man was at his table, reading.

"Thank you, Dadu," Khoka mumbled.

His grandfather looked up briefly, smiled an absent-minded smile, nodded and went back to his papers. Khoka ran back to his room, overjoyed. Dawn was breaking and crimson streaks stained the morning sky. The household was stirring. With a hum on his lips and a spring in his step Khoka was off to school soon, wearing his new slippers.

* * *

Malati closed the diary shut.

"So is Khoka Prahlad's friend?" she asked her son.

Prahlad was not sure but nodded doubtfully. Winnie the Pooh *was his friend, so were* Pinocchio *and* Bob the Builder. *But, Khoka?*

"Mamma, did Khoka really like going to school? Even when he had fever?" the little boy looked up doubtfully at his mother. He still couldn't believe that someone could love school so much! Of all the things he had heard about Khoka this one fact stuck in his mind.

"Yes, Prahlad, very much. He loved to learn all the things his teachers taught him. And he had a lot of friends at school too."

"My teacher taught me a poem about the sun and the moon, Mamma! And I have lots of friends too," Prahlad thought for a while and said.

"I am sure you do, Prahlad," she said trying to hide her elation. Her ruse was working!

"Who is Khoka, Mamma?"

Malati hugged Prahlad tightly. "I told you. He was a little boy like you who lived long ago," She pulled Prahlad close. "Come, I will tell you about him," and she began . . .

* * *

Khoka's father Santosh Bhushan Bose had died of tuberculosis, when Khoka had been just three and Khuki, six. Their father had been an engineer with the Eastern Railways and posted at the Ganderia Railway Station, a very busy and large railway junction, in the eastern part of the recently divided state of Bengal. They lived in the big family mansion which was close to the station, in a large joint family headed by Khoka's grandfather Kallicharan Bose. It was one of the better known houses in the town.

Khoka still carried hazy images of his father playing the violin every evening. Their days were filled with music, stories and laughter.

"Didi, do you remember Baba?" he would sometimes ask his sister.

"Not much. But I remember that he was tall and thin. And, he laughed a lot. He used to take all of us for picnics to the riverfront; even Dadu and Thakuma came along."

Khoka couldn't remember all occasions, but remembered the time when his father and he went for a walk along the river Padma which flowed by the town of Narayangunj.

"Come, I will show you where the Padma meets the Meghna," his father had said as they had walked up to the point where the two major rivers converged. That spot had been a favourite one for him ever since.

Khoka had assigned certain characteristics to each member of the large joint family.

Dadu (Grandfather): Serious. He spoke very little but was always giving orders to the others, when he was not busy with legal books and papers in his study.

Thakuma (Grandmother): Blessings. She never

ended a sentence without blessing the person she was talking to. Even if she gave an order to her daughters-in-law and the servants, it would be followed by her blessings. Her scolding came with a blessing too!

"Thakuma, can I have a little of the tamarind pickle?"

"Wait, Khoka. I'll get it. I'm an old woman. My joints creak whenever I move."

"You don't get up, Thakuma. I know where it is."

"Oh, you kids are impossible. No secrets can be kept from you. Ok, take some, but only a little bit! *Beche thako* (God bless)!"

Chhoto Kaka (Younger uncle): Dismissive. His favourite line: "Go away, all of you. Can't you see I'm busy?"

Mejo Kakima (Saroja): Love and sweetmeats. "Quick, come into my room. I've kept some *malpuas* for you." She would hug the kids and take them to her room whenever she saw them around.

In fact, Saroja was his favourite aunt. He remembered the day she had come home as the new bride of Uncle Nirmal. Decked in her vermillion wedding sari and jewels, she looked beautiful but seemed sad and lonely. Little Khoka had slowly gone to her and put his hand on hers. She had pulled him close and hugged him and since that moment they had become best of friends.

* * *

Malati stopped at this point. She was not sure if Prahlad was old enough to understand the following chapters. She would let him read them when he became a little older. She closed the diary.

"Time for a nap!" she told Prahlad.

"But I want to hear more stories about Khoka," he whimpered.

"Later! Right now, go to sleep," she tucked him in.

However, she couldn't stop reading the journal and continued reading Khoka's story.

* * *

Khoka's grandfather's house was a large one with many rooms. Most of the rooms were occupied and kept open. But, there were some which were closed and so held an element of mystery and fear for the children. They were curious about these rooms and thought of investigating them, though not sure of what they might find there!

Of these, there was one which though not locked, was dark and had a curtain drawn across the threshold. The room was the subject of great speculation for the children.

"I've often seen a light at night. I've also heard someone singing, I swear," Khoka told his cousins excitedly one day.

"And, I've heard hushed whispers," Nandu added his own discovery.

"Shall we peep in and see who is there?" asked Khoka.

They looked at each other fearfully. Clearly no one felt brave enough to venture in, including the most adventurous of them all—Khoka.

However, as they grew up, they came to know about the occupant. It was Dolly *Pishi*, his father's younger sister. She had been the beloved of the family, being born after three boys. When she had been two, she had fallen off the first floor terrace and hurt her head. Even

though she had survived, her brain had been affected and she had become mentally unsound after that.

Khoka's grandmother loved her a lot and kept reminiscing about the time an actor had taken a fancy to Dolly, when she had been young. She narrated the incident with relish and a lot of drama.

Apparently, Dolly Pishi had been a beauty. Once she had gone to see a play by one of Calcutta's well known drama troupes with her family. The play was Ramayana and the scene was that of Sita's *swayamvar*. Just as Sita was about to garland Rama, the actor playing the role of Rama, got off the stage, walked up to Dolly and proclaimed that he wanted to marry her and not Sita!

Dolly had been whisked off the scene and taken home before things got out of hand. The next day however, the actor had landed at the house. While he tried to convince Kallicharan Bose of his honourable intentions, Dolly had skipped into view.

Khoka was listening with rapt attention, as his grandmother continued: "And, your grandfather said to the young man, 'We don't entertain actors as sons-in-law in this house. Moreover, my daughter is . . . ."

"But before he could finish the sentence Dolly had started singing and pirouetted in front of the young man . . . ."

"And, what happened to the actor?" Khoka persisted, as usual eager to know all the details.

"He ran away," his aunt replied, while his grandmother wiped her tears.

Dolly Pishi was not the only member about whom nothing much was spoken or heard. There were others too and Khoka learnt about them as he grew older. One

such member was Barun, whose name cropped up occasionally during family discussions.

"Ma, who is Barun?"

"Your father's younger brother," Labonya told Khoka.

"Where is he?"

"He has taken to a life of spirituality to seek God. He lives in Kashi (present day Varanasi)."

"Oh," said Khoka. It suddenly struck him that there might be more relatives of whom he didn't know.

"Are there any other relatives of father, ma?" he asked now.

Labonya looked at her son. Khoka was very inquisitive and intelligent. He would be able to understand the issues involved, if she told him about the others. She made her mind up.

"There is another aunt of yours, Mili, who teaches in Dhaka Medical College." informed Labonya.

"Is Mili my *Pishi*? And she is a doctor?" asked Khoka, eyes wide with astonishment.

"Yes. She has a brilliant mind and wanted to pursue medicine."

Khoka had heard the name but never thought that she would turn out to be such a close relative. He had observed uneasiness amongst those present whenever that name came up.

"But why doesn't she ever come home?" he asked.

"She makes no one happy here and she returns unhappy herself. So she stopped coming," his mother had said.

"Why?"

"There were two reasons. Firstly, since she was a brilliant student, your grandfather wanted her to study

Law in London, but she decided to study Medicine instead. Your grandfather was furious and never forgave her."

"And the second reason?"

"She married a Muslim boy."

Khoka did not understand why this should result in the banishment of a family member.

"What's wrong with that? Our driver Rahman Kaka is a Muslim. He loves all of us and we love him, too. And, Zafar uncle is a very good family friend. The Ansaris, our neighbours in Giridih, are Muslims. And Salim Sir, our Science teacher is the best teacher we've ever had. What's wrong if she married a Muslim?" Khoka asked.

"It is not the same," his mother had said and left it at that.

Khoka mulled over all this but there was no one he could ask more questions about his family. These were moments when he missed his father. He would have been able to talk to him. At times, he did contemplate going to his grandfather, but decided against it. His Dadu was an awe-inspiring figure who had no time for trivial matters.

Kallicharan Bose was an imposing patriarch of the family and a barrister in the Dhaka High Court. He mingled with his family only on special occasions. He even had his meals alone in his study.

A man of few words with uncompromising principles and beliefs, he was highly respected not only in legal circles but also by the townspeople and even the British. The last mentioned not only respected, but also feared him. Nothing barring an emergency would take him away from the court when he had a case to fight. He fought

cases on principles and righteousness even when he was taking on the British in the bargain. He took on a case on behalf of a Santhal boy named Setu. The boy had killed his British employer, a Magistrate, and had been sentenced to death for the crime.

It would have been just another case for most lawyers of his repute, but for a diehard nationalist like Kallicharan Bose, it was the fight for a cause. He was fighting tooth and nail trying to reduce his sentence to life imprisonment.

The boy was just twenty and had been only recently married when one day, in a fit of uncontrolled rage, he had shot the magistrate, Mr Langhorn, through his head while the latter was having his morning cup of tea. On

the face of it, it looked like an unprovoked act, but behind it lay years of suppressed hatred, rage and exploitation.

Having lost his father at an early age, Setu and his mother had been in the service of the magistrate almost as bonded labourers. Beating and abuse were the order of the day for Setu and his mother. The earlier master Mr Moore had been kind, but Mr Langhorn was the kind of person who considered natives his slaves.

Two nights before the murder, his mother had been sent to the magistrate's room by his wife on an errand. Setu had gone home but it was very late when she came back, her face swollen and her clothes in tatters. Setu had been shocked at her appearance. He tossed and turned before falling into a fitful sleep. When he woke up in the morning, his mother was not there. They fished out her body from the river later that day and the next morning Setu cremated her.

That night he told his young wife of how he and his mother had been treated all through the years by their employers and why his mother killed herself. He was crying.

"Let us leave this place and go away," she suggested.

"We won't be able to get away far. They will find us. Besides, we have no money to go up to even the next village."

"In that case, I'll be the next victim," his wife had said quietly. Setu did not reply. The girl quietly went and brought the gun that Mr Langhorn had given Setu to clean that morning.

"Kill him," she said in an expressionless voice. In a fit of rage he had killed him the next morning. Only it was no liberation for him but a death sentence.

Kallicharan Bose, who had never lost a case till then, knew that it would be his first defeat. Yet, he fought for justice. In the middle of his argument in the court, he got word of his son's death. But with grit and resolve, he completed his closing argument before rushing home.

At the funeral, he stood tight-lipped, watching his little grandson, lighting the funeral pyre with his tiny hands, unable to comprehend the enormity of his loss. Khoka's father had left behind his twenty two-year old widow and two children, aged three and six. Kallicharan Bose led his daughter-in-law Labonya and the two children home.

Thinking about his grandfather with awe and admiration, Khoka knew that he would not entertain any question over his doubts about Mili Pishi marrying a Muslim and kept quiet.

* * *

Prahlad was waking up. When he saw the diary in his mother's hand, he began clamouring for more stories. Malati smiled. She would tell him the stories she had just read some day when he was old enough to understand them, but not today.

"Don't you want to go out and play? Come, I will give you milk and change your dress," she said, pulling him out of the bed. She gave him the diary.

"Keep it. It's yours now," she said. Prahlad looked at Malati and slowly took the diary from her hands.

A family inheritance had just been passed on, and hopefully the genes too, thought Malati with a smile.

Initially when he had been too young to read the handwritten notes he would turn the pages over looking at the scrawled handwriting. And then, invariably come running to

her, "Ma, tell me a Khoka story," he would say and hand the diary to her.

Over the following months and years, though Prahlad took care to appear nonchalant about the tales and their influence on him, he began liking high-spirited Khoka and his adventures but he would never admit as much to his mother.

He also had more or less reconciled himself to the fact that school had to be lived through. There were still occasions when he threw a tantrum or protested about going to school, but

they were less and far between. Prahlad's grades although nothing exceptional, were not too bad, but he took much more interest in extra-curricular activities, especially dramatics and football. Malati was relieved and happy that he had finally adapted himself to school and its activities.

But he often came up with some new demand, some of which could not be met, like this latest one to change his name.

She now heard Prahlad turn on the music in his room. "Thank you, Khoka!" she breathed, smiling.

* * *

3

Prahlad was gifted a laptop by his father's friend Max, who had come from Canada the day before.

"He's too young to have his own laptop," she told her husband. Prahlad heard her.

"Oh, I knew you would come up with some objection to this!" he burst out. "Do you know that computers have become part of studies today?"

Rohit consoled her saying that he would be fine with it. But true to her fears, he became glued to it. Though they had a desktop, owning a personal laptop was something of a novelty.

Malati fretted that he would stop playing outdoors and with social networking like Facebook and Twitter, he would get addicted to the internet. 'He'll ruin his health,' she thought.

The next day, Prahlad walked into the room, grinning from ear to ear, his laptop under his arm.

"Awesome, isn't it? I bet, I'm the only guy in class to have my own laptop, yeah Mom?" Prahlad said, not expecting any response from Malati.

He set it down on the dining table and started punching the keys. "I just can't believe it!"

"There's nothing to feel proud about."

Prahlad looked at her, a little surprised by the sharpness of her tone. He shut the laptop, folded his hands and looked hard at Malati's bent head as she pretended to be too engrossed in the potatoes she was peeling.

"Tell me Mom, why is it that you always play the spoilsport?"

Malati refused to rise to his bait and reply him. The last thing she wanted to do was get into an argument with her son. But she had to respond. Suddenly, an idea occurred to her. She looked at Prahlad from the corner of her eye.

"You don't mean it, do you?" she asked with a forced laugh.

Prahlad didn't reply. He had opened the laptop again and was staring at the screen. He looked upset still. He didn't want to get into an argument with his mother either.

"You remember our talking last week about the forest camp being organised at Matheran by Tiger Woods Club, don't you? I've given your name for that. It is this Friday."

"Huh? What?" Prahlad's head snapped up. "What made you do that without even asking me? For your information, I'm not going," he snapped.

"But didn't you tell me just last Tuesday that you were interested? Matheran is full of wildlife and a trekkers' delight. There is a difference between real and virtual experience. It'll be a great adventure with boys of your age. You'll make new friends. It will be fun; go for it, Prahlad, please!" Malati's tone had changed. She was almost pleading.

Prahlad looked at his mother and took a deep breath. "You can really go on Mom, can't you? I won't go for any camp, and that's final. And now I want to do some work." With that he picked up his laptop and left the room.

His mother sighed. Was it the same boy who had once been so fond of the outdoors who just needed an excuse to run out. He couldn't be caught sitting at home. She remembered the time when he had been heartbroken when his school picnic had been cancelled due to rain and Malati had to tell him a Khoka story to pacify him . . . . .

She had remembered the time Khoka and his cousins had gone on a picnic.

'Do you know that when Khoka and his cousins went on a picnic to the woods, it began raining suddenly, just like this?' she had asked.

For all his pretence of not being keen on the stories of Khoka, Prahlad was very interested in them. He had by now got used to his mother telling stories from the diary from time to time. "When I am in a bad mood, she will come up with one," he grinned to himself, secretly enjoying them. And now that it looked clear that he could not go for the picnic, he thought a story about a picnic might have to do.

Malati began telling him about the rains in the forests of Giridih, how they came on sometimes suddenly and without warning, just as it had that day in Hyderabad. She told him of the intoxicating fragrance of the Mohua flowers filled the green valleys of the Chhota Nagpur Plateau and how the bears danced madly, drunk on the sweet syrup of the flower.

". . . it was to these woods that Khoka and his cousins went for a picnic, which turned out into an adventure," she said.

Prahlad was all ears by now.

"Do you want to read it yourself or shall I read?" she asked him.

"You do it," he said settling himself comfortably on the bed and making space for her to sit. He liked her soft voice reading the story and it somehow transported him to that age and time when she read it.

* * *

One day, Khoka, Benu, Nimu, Gopal and Sarat crossed the Usri River to explore the woods on the other side, with a picnic hamper in tow. Gopal was their neighbour and usually joined in all the activities of the cousins. The woods were considered safe since the big cats lived

far in the jungle and usually did not come down to the river bank.

The boys wanted to make the most of the last days of their summer vacation. Khoka had shifted to Giridih along with his mother and sister in 1940, when Dhaka became the centre of action for the British and American forces to launch their battles against the Japanese. Khoka loved Giridih, where the maternal side of his family lived. It was not just because he had a houseful of cousins there, but also since Hazaribagh, where another set of his mother's relatives lived, was close by. His maternal grandfather, his Dadamoshai, lived in Hazaribagh along with some of his uncles and Khoka's visits there during his vacations were usually quite exciting.

But, it was Giridih where he spent most of his childhood, frolicking in the neighbouring forests, bathing in its mountain streams, and indulging in a new adventure every day.

Usri, which flowed along the fringes of the town of Giridih, was less a river and more a mountain stream. It wound its way down the stark hillsides of the plateau and could suddenly be inundated with flash floods as all such mountain streams were liable to.

The water, which at other times was only ankle-deep, would overflow its banks and rush furiously, sweeping everything in its path when there was even an ordinary downpour.

That day though, as the boys neared the riverbank, Usri was flowing gently, playfully tripping and stumbling over the smoothened pebbles. The boys crossed the stream, splashing water on each other, laughing and running. Climbing out of the river on the

other bank, they sprinted across the open grasslands, towards the woods.

"Let's race." Sarat was the oldest and the unspoken leader of the group and he challenged the others, knowing fully well that he would win, since he was the tallest and the fastest runner of the group.

However, it was Gopal who hit the woods first beating Sarat. The scent of the moist air, so typical of any place that has lots of vegetation, and the greenery of the surrounding forests was refreshing, and he took a deep breath inhaling the smell and sounds. But something made him feel a little uneasy. He tried to place a finger on it, but found nothing unusual in the rustling of the leaves in the gentle breeze. He shrugged at his own imagination.

Nimu was tagging along with Benu since he was the youngest at four, while Sarat and Khoka soon joined him, breathless with the run. Caught up in the excitement, Gopal pushed any uneasiness to the back of his mind though it wouldn't go away.

"I'm going to explore the woods, want to come along?" Khoka asked. Of course, everyone wanted to! So, they ran into the thick woods, amongst the Sal and Mohua trees, enjoying their cool shade and breathing in the aroma of the flowers and foliage.

"I hope we meet Mr Grizzly," Sarat remarked.

"Better not," replied Gopal. "He can be quite dangerous."

"No, he's not." Khoka said. "Like most wild animals, bears normally do not attack unless provoked. But yes, if by chance they do get to put their arms around you, they'll hug you real tight."

Though he said it in jest, the thought made them

uneasy. Actually, there was quite a chance that they could bump into a bear. These woods were often visited by them, perhaps because of the Mohua trees. The nectar from the flower of these trees was used for making a kind of alcohol. The boys had heard some townspeople talk about meeting a bear or two dancing away unsteadily, drunk on the heady nectar of the Mohua flower.

But that they were disappointed because there were not only no dancing bears but not even an ordinary one. It was a splendid afternoon, with sunshine sprinkling the forest floor through the trees.

"Let's pluck some *jamuns*," Khoka suggested. A group of *jamun* trees, drooping under the weight of their produce, stood in a cluster as though waiting to be shaken and relieved of their burden. The boys rushed at the trees and shook them to be rewarded with a magnificent spray of purple berries. The fun lay in not just eating the fruits, but to climb the trees and pluck them. So, they all scampered up, all except Benu, who agreed to wait below. They chatted animatedly for the next fifteen minutes or so as they stuffed their mouths with the succulent berries while throwing down some to Benu.

"Shh!" said Gopal suddenly. Though he was joining in the fun, he had not been able to shake off the uneasiness and had been a little subdued for some time now.

"The rains always bring with them gifts of fruits," Sarat completed what he was saying.

"I said, Quiet!" Gopal ordered. "Listen!"

Instantly the chatter ceased. The boys stiffened and looked around, swallowing their apprehension as they

strained their ears. Silence. There was complete silence. It was eerie. Outwardly nothing had changed. It was as if someone had pressed a button to mute the sounds of the forest, which suddenly appeared bereft of life. Where there had been sounds and movement of the denizens of the woods, there was no movement at all. No animals scurried, no birds chirped, no leaf stirred, no bushes rustled with the activity of unseen rodents.

"Wh . . . what is it, G . . . Gopal *Da*?" Khoka stammered.

They did not hear anything at first, so busy had they been with the berries. And, then they did. The boys froze. But, Gopal had heard the warning call before they did, for his senses had been on high alert ever since they entered the forest. And now, the realisation hit him – the reason for the sudden silence.

The third call came soon after. A *sambhar* calling out, its unmistakable warning, so clear in all the stillness, a signal of approaching danger.

Sarat gulped. "Don't make a sound," he warned the others.

And, then they heard it again. Up in the tree, the boys sat numb, waiting with bated breath. Nimu quivered with fear his palms wet and sticky with the juice of the *jamuns*, which he had crushed to a pulp in his terror.

They all suddenly remembered the same thing—little Benu was waiting at the foot of the tree, all alone, blissfully unaware that he would be the first target for any predator.

"I'll go, get him," said Khoka, his voice quivering with fright. He quickly climbed down the tree and told Benu, "Come on, get on my back."

Benu looked at him wide-eyed, open-mouthed.

"Why?"

"Because we are in danger. Now, quick!" said Khoka and bent down. Benu got on to his back, still surprised, but did as he was told. Back on the branch, Khoka took up his position and continued waiting, quietly shivering in fright. Suddenly, his nose tickled. He wanted to scratch it very badly, but dared not. Then, his ear and soon, his entire body was itching and Khoka felt that if he didn't scratch it in the next second, he would die. But, he managed to control himself, so scared was he of making a move and alerting whatever it was that lurked out of sight.

Khoka, Nimu and now Benu were on the same tree, Gopal on the next one, and Sarat on yet another, a little away from the rest. He was not very comfortable being alone. But, since he was the oldest and liked to be considered a leader, he had to put up a brave face. So, they all waited in their respective places, afraid even to breathe. The wait seemed endless. But, nothing emerged out of the shadows. After quite a while, Sarat squeaked, "I think whatever it was . . . ."

Fear had robbed him of his voice and it came out in a squeak. He cleared his throat.

"I think, whatever it was, has decided not to make an appearance at least for the moment. We should leave now. But let us be quick," he managed to say in a normal tone and got off the tree.

"Are you sure, Sarat *Da*?" Khoka asked, reluctant to be out in the open. The tree seemed safer.

"Yes, yes. It'll be dark soon. We should reach home before that," Sarat replied not too sure. The rest of the gang joined him one by one, each looking doubtful.

"Let's run!"

Almost at the same time, the *sambhar* called out again. Without a moment's hesitation, Sarat sprinted.

"Wait, Sarat!" Gopal called out. "Benu can't run." They all turned to look at him. Benu looked white as a sheet ready to drop any minute out of fear.

Sarat retraced his steps and without a word, lifted Benu on to his back. "Hold on tight. Don't let go, no matter what happens," he told the little boy who looked as though he had seen a ghost. To the rest, Sarat ordered, "Follow me and don't stop till we are out of the woods, okay!"

The boys nodded and quickly started making their way out of the forest, looking over their shoulders once in a while, tripping, stumbling, sweating, huffing and puffing. They had gone only a little further when Khoka stopped suddenly in his tracks, panting. And then, he started laughing. Everyone stopped and turned towards him.

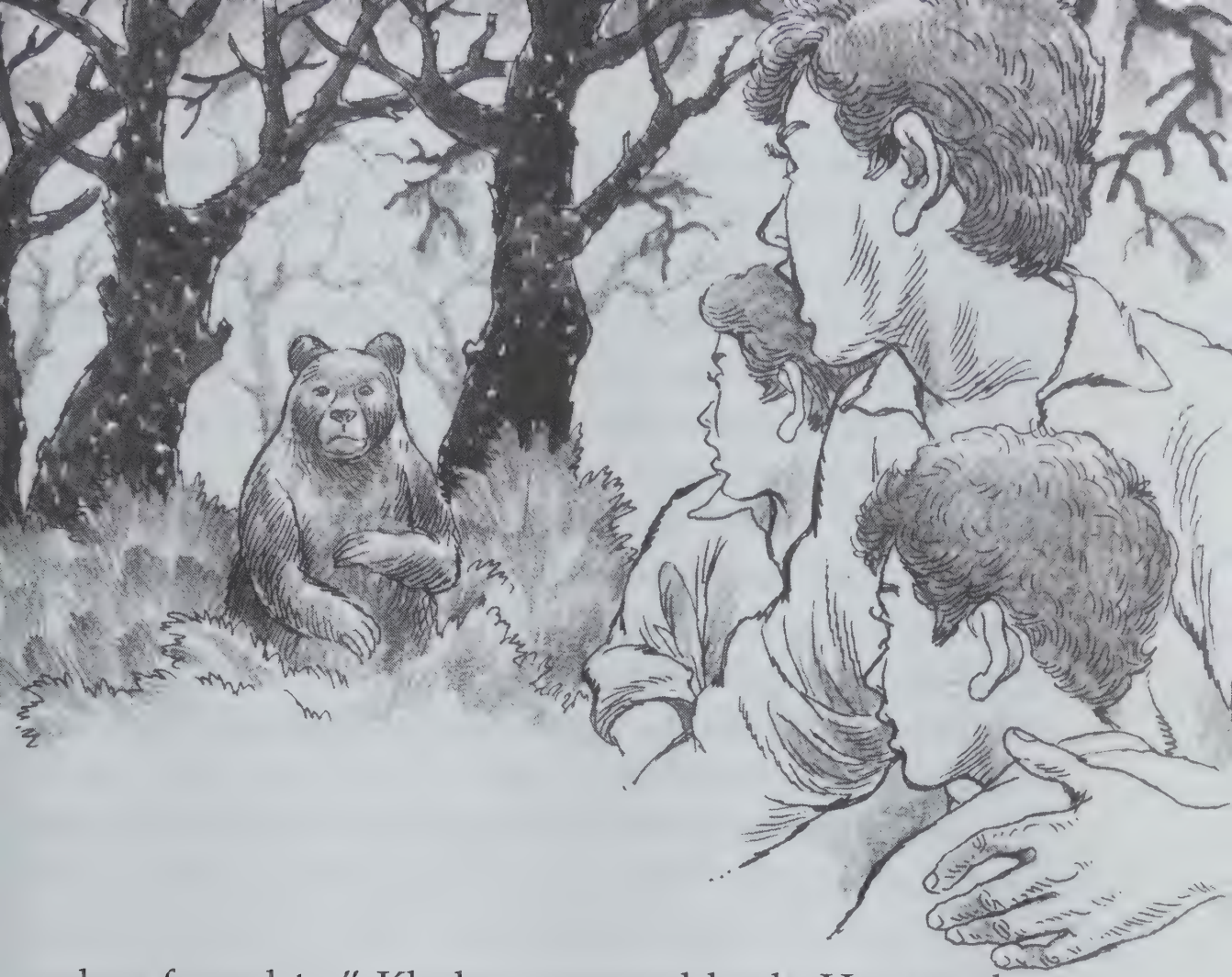
"What is so funny?" Sarat wanted to know, annoyed at the unnecessary delay Khoka was causing and also wondering why it was always Khoka and not he who noticed the funny things.

"We are so stupid," said Khoka. "We thought it was a tiger. But, there are no tigers in these woods. They live in the deep jungles, beyond the woods."

The boys thought about it for a while. Sarat was not so certain.

"So what? They can always sort of stroll into these parts. You know, change of scene and all!"

"What do you think wild animals are Sarat *Da*, human beings? They don't like changes. They are comfortable in their habitats and don't change them



unless forced to," Khoka answered back. He was the sensible one, and also read a lot about such things.

"You seem to kn . . . ," Sarat began retorting when suddenly Nimu clutched at his sleeve.

"Did you see that bush move?" Nimu, the quietest of the lot had suddenly noticed a movement in the undergrowth right in front of them.

Before the boys could reply or react, the bush parted and they were face to face with a black bear, big and hairy and scary. "Look at him!" Khoka exclaimed.

"Shut up, Khoka," Sarat was practically quaking with fear. "What do we do now?"

"Embrace him," Khoka tried to be funny, but his heart was pounding.

"It's not funny. We're in danger!" Sarat snapped, but at the same time envied Khoka's apparent fearlessness. Khoka, who had heard Uncle Dhanua's numerous exploits with bears, knew that if left unprovoked, they never attacked. So, he kept a straight face and put on a nonchalant expression.

"Don't do anything. Just stand without moving and keep looking into Mr Grizzly's eyes. He'll do you no harm. He's probably here to get a little drunk on Mohua syrup on a hot summer afternoon." Khoka spoke through half open lips afraid to betray even the movement of jaws.

And sure enough, within minutes of being collectively stared at—though it had seemed like ages—the bear emitted a low growl, its tongue hanging out, mouth wide open, as though smiling, turned and waddled away unsteadily, tipsy with the nectar of the forest. The boys had seen a dancing bear after all!

"Thank God!" The boys said together, letting out a collective sigh of relief. They'd had enough. Too eventful a picnic, as Sarat would tell his friends later. The relief that Khoka felt on seeing the bear walk away was so great despite his brave talk a little while ago, that he suddenly realised he was hungry. In all the tension and excitement of the past hour, the boys had forgotten their lunch.

Khoka suddenly remembered that he had forgotten the hamper in the woods. "I'll go and get it," he said and was about to turn back when Gopal caught his arm. "Khoka, are you mad?" he asked incredulously. "We'll be lucky if we can reach home safe and sound before it gets dark. Let's not delay further, okay?"

Khoka looked from one to the other, hoping for some support. Food was the last thing on their minds as they all wanted to reach home.

It was a long way back through the woods and across the grasslands to the stream. The sky was already turning a faint lilac, the first signs of a descending sun. They quickened their steps and began the long trek home. In about half an hour it would get dark and in these parts, the dark descended upon the earth suddenly.

Nobody noticed the eastern sky, which, even as the shadows of dusk coated the earth, was slowly turning inky black as dark clouds gathered menacingly.

The boys trotted on nervously. Despite Khoka's reassurance that the big cats didn't come down from the deep jungles, there was only one thought in everyone's mind, though no one spoke it aloud. In fact it had been in their minds ever since they had heard the *sambhar's* call.

Beyond the woods, lay the thick jungles of Giridih, home to the famous Royal Bengal Tiger. No one ventured out in these areas after nightfall as the tiger could probably be encountered on one of its vigils. Once, a few years back, a tiger had been spotted at the Usri River. That year had seen an unusually dry spell and all the watering holes inside the jungle had dried up. So, the tiger had crossed the woods outside the

jungle—the very same woods through which the boys were presently making their way—and had come out in the open to reach the Usri. A *dhobi* who had been washing clothes on the other bank had seen it. Knowing that the shallow river was no real hurdle for the beast, the man had abandoned the clothes and dashed back to town to breathlessly narrate the tale.

Between the river and the woods lay an open stretch of grassland, about a kilometre wide as the crow flies. Having finally emerged from the woods, the boys had just reached this stretch, when the heavens burst. At first, they thought of running back to the woods for cover.

"We'll wait in the woods till the rain stops," Khoka suggested. They looked at one another, each weighing the matter in his mind, none of them wanting to go back, including Khoka who had originally proposed it.

Sarat made the decision. "No, we run across the stretch and hit the stream," he said giving voice to their unspoken decision to press ahead. Although the distance to be covered would normally have taken them not more than fifteen minutes, it would take considerably longer now since the ground had become slippery and muddy. It was imperative that they reach the riverbank fast, because they knew that the Usri flooded with a vengeance during these sudden showers, as though making up for its dryness at other times.

As the boys slipped and slithered and neared the river, their worst fears were confirmed. It was the unmistakable roar of Usri, no longer the innocent gurgle that the boys had crossed just a while ago. It was frothing and foaming, and looked like a silver reptile, slicing its way through the red earth of the plateau. It was a scary sight.

"We can't go across," said Gopal, as they reached the banks of the river. Benu started wailing.

"Hush, Benu!" Khoka admonished his cousin gently. "Don't cry so loudly, you'll alert the wild animals of our presence." He turned to the other boys.

"Wasn't there a bridge somewhere?" He asked in a whisper.

The boys shook their heads.

At that moment, they saw a figure approaching them in the rain. The boys huddled together in fear. It was difficult to make out what it was in the rain. It was almost dark by then.

"What is it?" Nimu shook in fear.

"Could be anything. Let's run," Sarat shouted out.

"Wait a minute!" Khoka shouted back. The figure came closer. It was a man, probably a tribal who lived in one of the clearings in the forest. As he came closer, his face registered a look of surprise when he saw the five boys standing at the edge of the river, their clothes clinging to them, fear writ large on their faces.

"What on earth are you doing here at this hour? Don't you know, the *pheau* has been heard close by? Run along before one of you disappears," he said as he hurried along his way.

The boys knew what the call of the *pheau* meant. It was a kind of a jackal which moved around with tigers, but was clever enough to be just out of their sight and reach. Its call was a signal, heralding the arrival of a tiger in the vicinity.

Every child in Giridih and the neighbouring areas had heard it at one time or the other and that had meant no venturing out of homes, bolting of all doors and windows and keeping as quiet as possible. The boys stood still, too stunned to speak. What they had only suspected so far was confirmed. A tiger was about somewhere close.

The fast receding silhouette of the man melted in the darkness. Gopal was the first to speak. "I knew a tiger was around. None of you believed me. We stand no chance against it. We are completely unarmed and

exposed. Now, what do we do?" He was nearly in tears. The unusual silence, the *sambhar's* barks, and now, the call of the *pheau*! It was only a matter of time before the tiger would spot them. Or, perhaps it already had.

"It could be anywhere now. For all you know, even as we are talking, the tiger could be behind us, watching . . ." A chill went down Gopal's spine as he spoke.

Suddenly Khoka ran after the disappearing figure, almost slipping on the slushy ground.

"Excuse me, is there a bridge somewhere around here?" he shouted over the roar of the rain.

The man started at Khoka's voice. He turned around and saw the young boy trembling, more out of cold than fear.

Normally, talk of tigers was such a common topic of conversation in these areas that tales of its exploits were often related with much gusto and sometimes even with scorn, whenever humans had overpowered its prowess in some form or the other. But encountering one in a jungle was a different matter altogether.

The man frowned. "Yes, there is a bridge—a ropeway, about half a kilometre upstream." He said and started running.

At first, Khoka was overjoyed to hear of the bridge. Then, he thought over it. If it was only a ropeway would it take the weight of all of them? Moreover, Benu was too young. Could he make it?

There was one more thing. Upstream meant closer to the hills, to the jungle, and in the direction from where the *pheau* had been heard. The tiger would approach them from that direction. But did they have a choice? To be at the river bank under the open sky without cover, waiting for the rain to stop and then for Usri to

subside would be an open invitation to the beast. Khoka turned and hurried towards the others.

"Should we take a chance and attempt the bridge?" Khoka asked. "It might be riskier, but the chances are that we just might make it home."

"It all depends . . . ." Sarat said softly.

The boys looked at him. "Meaning?" Gopal asked.

"Where the tiger is at this moment—in the jungle, in the woods we've just left or . . . behind us," Sarat replied.

That decided it. They would try the bridge. Sarat being the oldest, tallest and also the strongest continued to carry Benu on his back.

Back home, people were getting worried. It was nearly dark and the children hadn't returned. News of this reached Manoranjan Ghosh, Khoka's eldest uncle and the head of the family. He emerged out of his room, holding the end of his *dhoti* in one hand, walking stick in another.

"We should go and look. It is not safe to be out of doors at this hour, especially on a day like this. Get the lanterns ready."

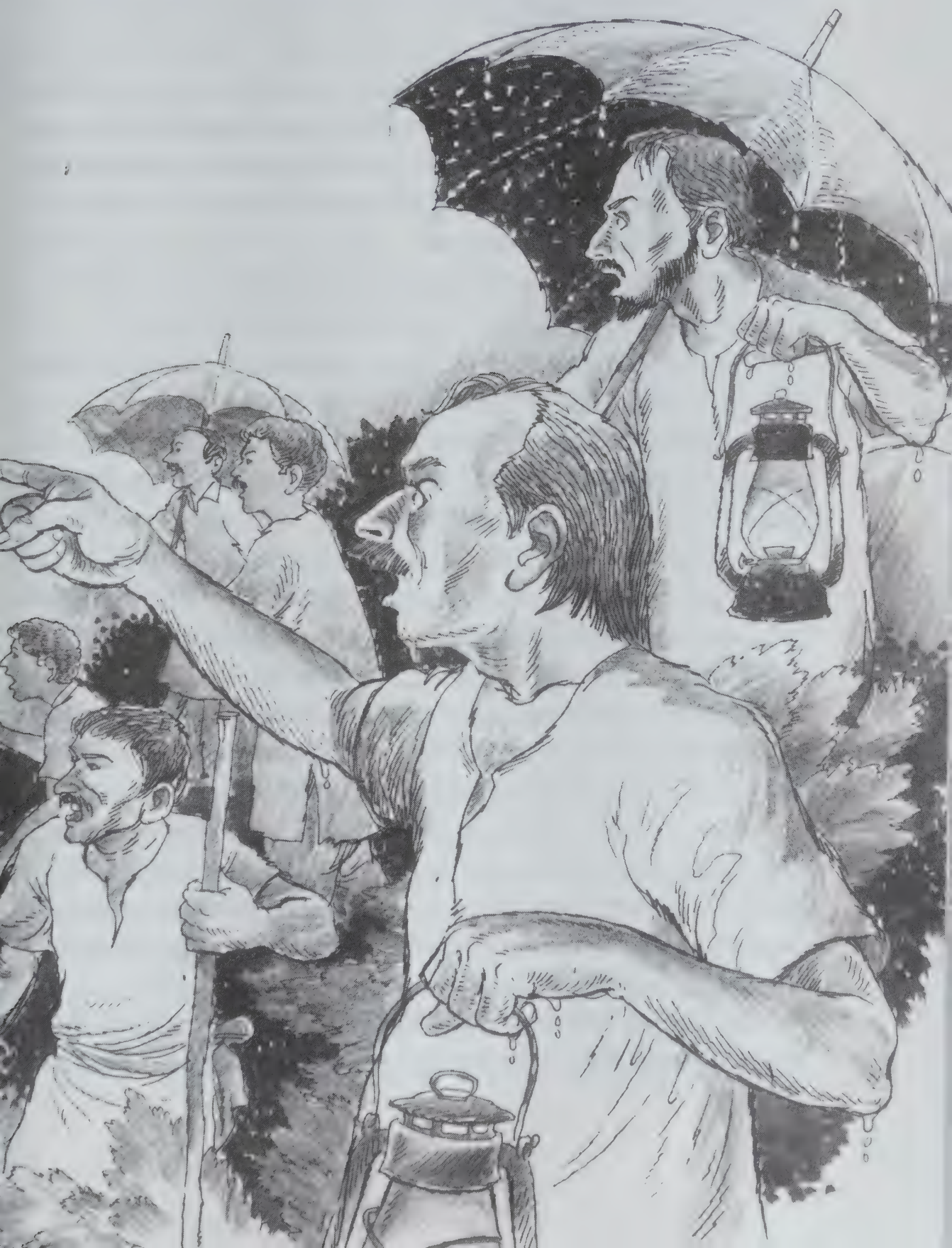
Within the next fifteen minutes, a group of six men, led by Parash, their young neighbour, set out with lanterns, empty jerry cans, sticks and umbrellas, to look for the boys.

Back at the riverbank, the boys stumbled over one another as they made their way in the direction of the bridge. Progress was slow. The ground was slushy and the pouring rain made for poor visibility. Moreover, darkness was closing in fast.

It was sometime before the outline of the ropeway loomed up in the faint light of the wet evening. Khoka was the first to spot it.

"There it is. Just a little ahead," he said, excitedly.

As they neared it, they made a quick survey of the bridge. It turned out to be just ropes woven very loosely to form a makeshift bridge. It was tied to two tree poles on either side of the river and swayed precariously, its



belly sagging close to the swollen waters of the gushing Usri as it swirled underneath.

"Okay, who goes first?" Sarat asked as they approached it.

Nobody volunteered. Time was running out. The rain showed no signs of abating. It was now completely dark. The river was overflowing its banks. The boys were scared as they knew that it would be a long while before they reached home, if at all. But they didn't want to think about it. The cat was perhaps close by, watching them, advancing stealthily. They shivered from the cold and the fear of the unknown. The ropeway swung from side to side gently, as though urging the boys to move.

"Okay, I'll go first," Khoka decided finally.

He stepped on the rope gingerly. The bridge swayed violently. Khoka lost his balance and fell.

"Look out," the boys screamed in unison.

As he went plunging down, he caught on to a rope with one hand to stop his fall.

"Hold on, I'm coming," Gopal shouted. Then, turning to the rest of the group he said, "Don't climb till I've pulled Khoka up. The ropeway will not take our combined weight all in one place."

Khoka was hanging under the bridge. He tried not to look at the angry swirling river underneath. Even though he was a good swimmer and wouldn't drown were he to fall, the current would buffet him against the rocks and injure him, or even sweep him away. Khoka's palms were bruised as the rope was rough and slippery and he held on with all his might. He knew he wouldn't be able to hold on much longer.

As Gopal climbed onto the bridge, he realised that the only way they could all go across was to put enough

distance between them as they negotiated the bridge so that the weight was spread out. Otherwise the rope would break and they would all go plunging into the river.

The ropes that formed the bridge were not tightly bound together and there were wide gaps, which meant that one had to find the place where two ropes criss-crossed and carefully put his foot on it. In order to balance himself, Gopal had to spread both his legs on two different lengths of ropes. Then slowly, very carefully, he bent down and extended one hand towards Khoka.

"Take my hand," He shouted. Khoka didn't hear him. But, he had seen one of them getting onto the bridge. As he looked up, blinked through the rain and saw a figure crouching above him. And then, he saw a hand close to his face, groping around. Khoka could not reach the hand. "Come closer," he shouted. Gopal heard and stretched his hand further.

Even as Khoka's hand touched Gopal's, the cat was dragging its prey along the river, stealthily approaching the little group that stood huddled together at the foot of the bridge, shivering in the rain. It stopped some way from the bridge and dropped the dead deer. Guarding its prey, it watched the boys quietly and waited.

Meanwhile, Gopal had pulled Khoka up and he was fumbling now to get a foothold on the rope.

Once back on the bridge, he straightened himself and regained his balance.

"Hurry up, will you?" Sarat was getting impatient. Even as he worried about the tiger, the beast watched them. How long would it wait before attacking the boys? Sarat, of course was unaware that every move of his

was being watched by the animal which stood just a few metres away.

Had Sarat looked over his shoulder, he would have seen a pair of eyes gleaming in the dark. But, his own eyes were focussed on the ropeway; he knew it would be a dangerous walk across the bridge.

Khoka ventured further, step by step, followed by Gopal. Both stubbornly refused to look down as the waters of the Usri flowed threateningly close to their feet.

Gopal turned towards the boys waiting below. And as he turned, he thought he saw something move, close to the bridge. He caught the faint outline of a huge shape. It could be a boulder or even some sort of a shrub or maybe the silhouette of a large beast? What could it be? A tiger or a panther?

It crouched a little distance away from the boys who stood at the foot of the bridge, watching and waiting. Even as he wondered what it was that had caught his attention, he stiffened as a low grunt resounded from somewhere close to the bridge, about 200 yards away to their right, from the direction in which the forest lay. Then Gopal knew that the thing that he had seen close to the bridge was the beast itself. And, it was waiting to attack. It was so close that the distance between them could be covered in one leap by it.

Gopal stood on the bridge, speechless and paralysed, still hoping it was not the tiger. But, there was no room for doubt. His blood ran cold. Would Sarat and the boys have heard or seen it too?

* * *

In the meanwhile, the party that had set out to look for the group of boys had reached the riverside. What they saw was terrifying. Usri was no longer just a stream. It had filled up, and at times like these, the current of the river would snatch anything and carry it away in a matter of minutes.

"Where are the boys?" Manoranjan Ghosh asked, looking around to catch a glimpse of any one of them.

Nobody answered. The grasslands seemed to stretch for miles, covered under water. It was still raining and the night sky was black.

"We would have found them on this side if they had crossed Usri," one of the men said.

"It has been raining for the last two hours and more. It takes very little time for the Usri to overflow with such a downpour. If the boys had crossed the river before it had flooded, they would have been home by now. Obviously, they couldn't cross it and which means that they are still on the other side. And, on that side, is the jungle." reasoned Parash.

Even as he said it, he hoped his assessment of the situation was wrong and that somehow, the boys had managed to cross the river and had perhaps taken shelter somewhere waiting for the rain to stop. Everyone in Giridih knew that no one went over to or stayed on the other side after dark.

"We'll have to go along the river and see if we can spot them on the other bank," Manoranjan Ghosh decided. For all you know, they are waiting at the riverside, hoping for Usri to subside."

"And, getting drenched under the open sky?" Parash wanted to know.

"It's better than waiting inside the jungle and getting

eaten by a tiger," Khoka's uncle replied. No one said anything.

* * *

The rain was making it difficult for Khoka to watch his step. After a few tentative steps, Khoka stopped. Something told him that he was advancing on the bridge alone.

"Gopal, are you okay?" he asked, half turning around, careful not to miss his step. There was no one immediately behind him. He saw Gopal quite a distance away turned towards the riverbank where the rest of his cousins waited.

"Why is Gopal not moving? Is he talking to Sarat? What's the matter?" Khoka wondered craning his neck and straining his eyes till they hurt. What he saw made his blood run cold.

* * *

As Manoranjan Ghosh and his group of men searched for the five boys in the wilderness, they prayed. The boys were in grave danger though no one articulated it. Nobody would even think of spending a night on the other side of the river, no matter what. But, with Usri flooding, did the boys really have a choice? There was, of course, no question of waiting by the riverside out in the open, a sure prey for any kind of wild animal. So, where were they? They shuddered to think of the boys being carried away by the river currents.

"There is a ropeway, a little ahead. We could cross the river if we use it. That is, if we have to look for them in the jungles," Parash suggested.

"What! There is a ropeway across the river?" Manoranjan Ghosh was totally surprised. "How come I didn't know about it? When did it come up?"

"About a year back. People who went to the jungles to collect firewood and the tribals who needed to go to town, decided to have a kind of a makeshift bridge which was needed especially on days such as these, when the Usri flooded."

Manoranjan Ghosh nodded excitedly. "In that case, let's head for the bridge!"

"Do you want to go into the jungles? There is nothing else on the other side," one of the men in the group asked, hoping they wouldn't need to go.

"Not yet. But, I know my boys, especially, Khoka. He doesn't give up easily. If he knows of the bridge, he'll try using it. Let's go," said Manoranjan Ghosh.

* * *

Khoka stood transfixed at his spot on the ropeway. As the sky rumbled and a flash of lightning lit up the night firmament, Khoka saw it clearly, its moist skin glistening in the silver light, its fiery eyes glowing in the dark. The rain had lessened somewhat and the view was clearing. Khoka could make out the silhouette of the large beast.

At first, he just didn't react. He was too numb with shock and terror. But, slowly he regained control of his senses. His cousins had to get on to the bridge as fast as possible. Benu was very small, so he would have to be carried up. That would add to Sarat's weight. Would the ropeway hold? There was no time to lose and no looking back. His mind was suddenly clear. They had to cross the bridge and do it in record time.

"Tell Sarat *Da* to pass Benu up to us, Gopal!" Khoka shouted as he made his way back. Why had the animal not attacked yet? What was it waiting for?

Sarat meanwhile, saddled with his two younger cousins, knew that the longer he stayed below, the greater were the chances of being picked up by the predator, wherever it was. His mind was clouded and he just didn't know what to do. He didn't turn to look, fearing to see whatever might be there. So, when Gopal told him to pass Benu on to him, without a moment's delay, he lifted the little boy up.

"Khoka, you'll have to hold me while I reach out for Benu, okay?"

So far, Sarat and the kids had kept rather quiet at the foot of the bridge as they waited for the boys on the bridge to stabilise their footholds. But now, there would be movement. Activity unnerved the mighty beasts. And, there was enough activity happening close by. How long would it be, before the tiger lost its patience and decided to attack?

As Gopal caught Benu, the added weight made the bridge sway dangerously and both Khoka and Gopal nearly lost their balance. Khoka had one arm around Gopal's waist and with the other he clutched one of the ropes for dear life.

"Benu, climb on to my back slowly, okay? And, hold on tight!" Gopal told the boy. Benu did as he was told. He had sensed that they were in danger and he wanted to help. Moreover, he wanted to go home. He was cold, scared and hungry.

With Benu clutching on to his back, Gopal proceeded. "What about Nimu?" As he uttered these words, he heard the beast once again. The same low

grunt, but a little louder this time. Had it got closer? How close? He shuddered to think of what might happen next.

Gopal realised that with Benu on his back it would be impossible to pull Nimu up as well. He looked at Khoka who had turned back and was continuing down the bridge. He had, by now made good progress and was quite ahead of him. Would he be able to turn back and take Benu? He dismissed the idea almost immediately. That would only delay matters.

"Sarat," he called out. "There are two options. You lift Nimu up and I'll try pulling him from my end. But tell him the effort has to be his. I can't take on so much weight together. The ropeway will collapse."

"What's the second option? Hur . . . !" As Sarat spoke, he sniffed. The smell that wafted through his nostrils, carried by the night air, sent a chill down his spine. The scent was unmistakable. The strong feline odour confirmed his worst fears. He gulped. His mouth went dry and he stood rooted to the spot as though paralysed. The animal was close, very close, or closing in.

"Sarat! Hurry up!" Gopal's voice suddenly rang in Sarat's ears. He looked up and saw the bridge swaying gently. Below, the river flowed with venomous ferocity. He looked to his side. Nimu stood beside him waiting to be rescued. Sarat knew that the tiger would go for Nimu first as the resistance would be less. Nimu's life depended on him.

He shook himself. He suddenly felt as though a bolt of lightning had coursed through his entire body.

"Quick, Nimu. Get on to my back, there's no time to be lost." Everything depended on how fast they could get on to the bridge. It was only a matter of minutes,

possibly seconds which would determine whether they lived or died. In a few moments, everything could be over for them. Sarat hurried—as much as one could hurry while climbing a slippery rope bridge that swayed in the wind.

* * *

As the rescue party spotted the outline of the bridge, swinging madly in the distance, they looked at each other.

"There is no storm, so why should the bridge swing?" One of the men asked.

"Obviously, something has disturbed it. Either it's the children or . . ." Parash trailed off, hoping his first guess was correct, and it was the children who were trying to cross it.

"Anyway, let's get on to it!" he ordered.

"But, what if we are in danger? It is not safe to try the bridge," one of the men argued.

"We can't be in more danger than the children are in. We are adults. Moreover, we are armed. They are more vulnerable to the predators. Anyway, if you don't want to come, stay back. But, I will go. Anyone else coming with me?" Parash thundered.

* * *

The ropeway swayed madly as more weight was put on it.

"Look out, Sarat! You'll make the bridge collapse!" Gopal shouted, oblivious to the fact that help was just a few steps away. All he could think of was to get as much distance between the animal and themselves.

Without looking back, he advanced slowly, very slowly. Benu, hunched over his back, trembling with fear.

Sarat, who had nearly reached the top of the rope he was using to climb up, knew it would require maybe two or three steps more to get on the bridge. And then, they would be safe. One thing Sarat knew. The animal could not make it across the bridge which was too weak to support an animal the size of a tiger. Moreover, the gaps were too wide. Even if the cat was a leopard, the most sure-footed of the canines, the ropes were too thin for it to get a good grip. But, there was no way to find out which cat it was. He dared not look behind.

The chances were, either the tiger would get them or the bridge would give way, Sarat thought gloomily. But never one to give up, he hoped for the best.

Khoka, meanwhile, laboured on, making slow but steady progress. Following him, a little distance away, was Gopal with Benu on his back. The river was not too wide at the point where the bridge was, so they would be able to cross over soon enough. In a few moments, Khoka would reach the halfway mark. Only Sarat was still to get on the bridge, but he was climbing.

At first, Khoka thought it was his imagination. A tiny dot of light danced in the distance. He strained his eyes through the darkness and the rain. There were more dots, flickering in the wet darkness. His curiosity piqued and his steps quickened. As the dots got closer, they got bigger and brighter. Suddenly, Khoka realised what the quivering yellow dots were.

He was overjoyed. Somebody was out there, looking for them. So excited was he at the thought of help arriving that he almost missed his next step and nearly went plunging down.

"Khoka, look out!" Gopal screamed as he saw Khoka tottering ahead of him. But, Khoka would not slip now. There was a new found confidence in his step which comes with hope. He quickly regained his balance and turned to tell his cousins the good news. And when he did, he stood rooted at the spot.

* * *

The men climbed onto the bridge, one by one. Placing their lanterns by the side of the river, they left three men behind which included Manoranjan Ghosh.

"Ma Kali, please protect my children," he chanted as the men mounted the ropes.

* * *

As Khoka's eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness, the silhouette of the tiger showed clearly. It was right beside the bridge, crouching on its hind feet, ready to spring. Sarat was a mere foot away, halfway up the ropes, unaware that the big beast stood next to him, poised for attack. He was looking upwards, his legs dangling as he tried to secure a foothold. Nimu, who was about eight years old, was pretty heavy and this made his progress slow and laborious.

"Just a little more, and we'll be up on the bridge," he told himself. "Come on, come on, we've nearly made it," he said aloud to encourage Nimu, who slumped on his back, scared stiff. The smell of the animal was very strong as though the night air was filled with it, warning them of its proximity. Sarat knew that the cat was dangerously close and he didn't want to look behind him. That might make him lose his nerve. "Hold on Nimu, we're there, almost."

Nimu had been responding to whatever Sarat said in some way or the other, either a 'huh' or a pat on the back or something. But, when he didn't respond this time, Sarat tore his eyes away from the rope and looked over his shoulder.

"Ma Kali! O Ma Kali!" Was all he could say.

"Sarat *Da*, I'm coming, hold on . . . . Don't let go." Khoka, who had spotted the tiger seconds before Sarat saw it, was already heading back. He should never have gone ahead but stayed and helped Sarat and Nimu.

Gopal also turned back. "We'll have to reach them, whatever it takes," he shouted as Khoka passed him on the bridge.

Khoka prayed as never before. "Oh, God, please let the tiger go away. Please, please, PLEASE!"

"It's okay Sarat *Da*, we'll make it," aloud he screamed as tears streamed down his face. He was furious with himself. "Why did we come, oh why!" he asked himself again and again. "It's all my fault. It was all my idea to come on this picnic. Picnic indeed!"

Khoka plucked Nimu from Sarat's shoulder and passed him on to Gopal.

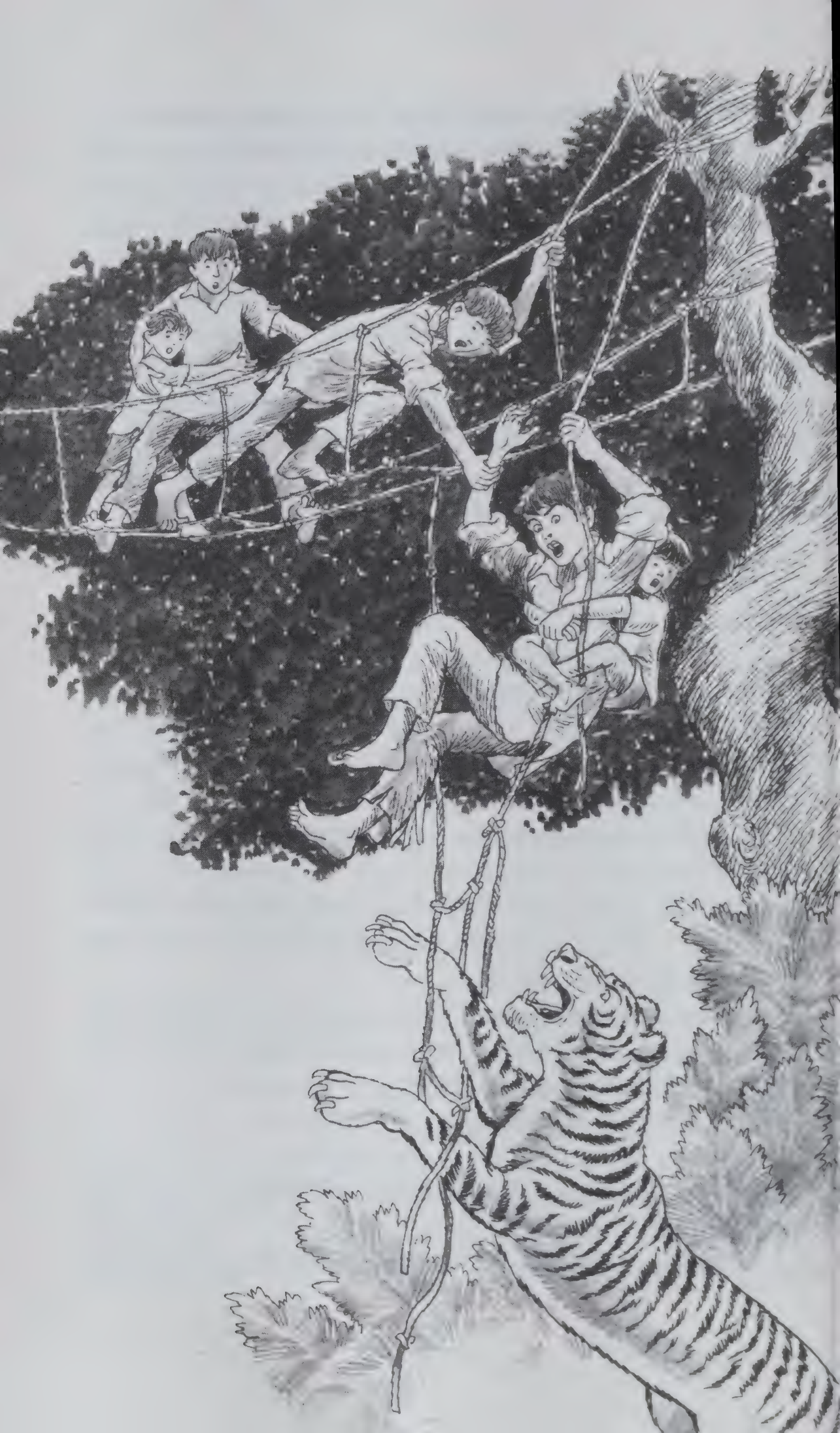
"Nimu, you'll have to stand on the bridge till Sarat *Da* comes, okay?" Without waiting for his reply, he turned towards Sarat.

"Here, hold my hand, Nimu. Don't worry. We are safe," Gopal reassured the boy and took his hand. Both Nimu and Benu were wailing.

* * *

"Pass me a lantern," shouted Parash leading the rescue party. "I can't see a thing."

A lantern was handed to him. He held it away from



himself to make an assessment of the bridge and its capacity to hold their combined weight. Although the ropeway had been around for the last one year, there hadn't been any real need to cross it. Only once, a few months back, Parash had walked on it just for the fun of it. But then, it had been a bright sunny day, and it had been fun trying to balance on the ropes. Little did he think at that time that he would be traversing it once again, and that would be serious business—a matter of life and death.

Nothing much could be made out in the dark. But from what he recollected, the bridge would be around half-a-kilometre long.

"Well, let's see if the children are anywhere on it. I just hope the rain has kept the animals away from venturing this far." Little did he know that the dreaded canine waited at the other end.

Khoka reached out for Sarat. As their hands met and Khoka closed his grip around it, the animal finally leaped.

"Jump, Sarat *Da*, jump! I'll pull you."

Sarat caught a rope by the side and as Khoka heaved, Sarat put his entire body's force and leapt. The tiger missed his leg by half an inch and its sabre-like teeth ripped apart his trousers as its claws grazed Sarat's skin. Its front paws got caught in the mesh of ropes and it struggled wildly to set itself free, gnawing at the ropes. Each time it failed, it let out a blood-curdling roar. Frustrated at having missed its quarry and getting tangled amidst the ropes, the tiger roared again and again.

* * *

"That's the roar of a tiger!" Manoranjan Ghosh standing on the bank of the river exclaimed. "And, pretty close by. It sounds angry, as if wounded or trapped."

The men on the bridge halted in their tracks as they heard the tiger roar. The bridge was shaking violently. As the tiger had missed Sarat, its weight was thrown on the ropeway sending it swinging furiously. The beast leapt again and again. The ropeway swung madly. The boys struggled to keep their balance on it.

"We can't go on," one of the men said. "The tiger's on the other side."

"Yes, I know," said Parash. "But, it can't cross the ropeway. It won't take its weight. Something has upset it. Maybe the children . . . ." he trailed off, a faint glimmer of hope appearing. If the tiger had been successful in its attack, it would not have made any sound. Obviously, something had happened to have upset it.

As Sarat was hauled up over the top, he fell, his body lying sprawled on the rope mesh, half dangling, and his torn trousers flapping in the wind. He lay inert with the shock, and Khoka had to shake him violently to make him move.

"Sarat da, get up and move!" and then a little gently, "its okay, you are safe. The tiger can't get on to the bridge. But, it might try."

Sarat slowly opened his eyes. Khoka stood over him, smiling, tears still glistening in his eyes.

"You did it, Sarat da. Now, we have to move on. Please get up."

Sarat nodded and slowly raised himself. His body felt as though it was made of lead and the shock of the near-fatal attack had blanked out his mind. But, he knew he had to move. With great effort, he raised himself and

stood on his feet. As he supported himself on Khoka's arm, he took a deep breath.

"Ghosh, I'm still alive. I thought it was all over." He looked over Khoka's shoulder. The beast was still struggling to free itself. But, it had stopped roaring as frequently. It would thrash around intermittently, its tail lashing and splashing the water that had collected on the river bank. Once in a while it would roar, and then fall silent, before letting out an angry growl again.

As the children trudged along, the rescue party advanced from the other end. "Can you see those lights?" Khoka asked, but somehow the excitement he had felt when he first saw them was missing from his voice. "People are searching for us."

When they had nearly reached the half-way mark, they could make out figures holding lanterns. One, two, three, Khoka counted. Slowly and steadily, both parties advanced towards each other. Every step was important. Not just because one careless step could hurl them into the rushing river, but with each step the distance between the two parties reduced.

When Parash finally extended his hand and touched Gopal's, the boy broke into frenzied sobs.

"It's okay, Gopal, it's okay. We are here now. Don't worry," said Parash, attempting to calm the boy. Gopal nodded, and passed Benu over to him, who was tossed from hand to hand like a ball. Next to be helped was Nimu who had been witness to the tiger's attack and was numb with shock. Sarat, who was badly bruised and bleeding at various places, both due to the ropes and the tiger's claws having scraped the skin of his right calf where his trousers had torn, was the next to go. Gopal and Khoka followed without a word.

The children, cold and numb, were too stunned to talk on the way back. But, once they reached their doorstep, it was as if the floodgates had opened. All at once, they started shivering and crying, screaming and chattering. They were quickly taken inside, each one given a hot bath and some hot broth to eat. Sarat was administered first-aid to avoid infection and then taken to the hospital. He would take a while to get well. The rest were tucked into bed. The stories could wait till the next day.

The following morning, Gopal and Khoka once again set forth for the woods, but this time as part of a group of about ten people. Nimu and Benu were too sick to go, so they stayed back. The rains had stopped in the early hours of the morning, and Usri was subsiding though still not the gentle stream that it usually was. The waters had receded and now came up to their knees. They crossed it easily, this time. Khoka and Gopal looked at each other, while crossing it and shuddered as they thought of the night before. Had the nightmare really ended?

When they reached the other side, the tiger was no longer there. But, the ground seemed as though it had been ploughed through, a witness to the tiger's struggle as it attempted to free itself from the ropes the night before.

"The tiger had thrashed around here and had lashed out at everything around it," Gopal said. "But eventually, it seems to have managed to free itself."

"But, did it come this far? Had it been following you ever since you left the woods?" Parash asked.

The boys shrugged. "Possibly," Khoka replied. "The *pheau* had been heard and the animals in the woods had

been aware of its presence," he said recounting the sudden silence and the appearance of the tribal man who told them of the *pheau*.

"Look at that," suddenly one of the men said, pointing at something lying in the open on the grasslands, a little distance away. "The remains of a spotted deer!"

"The tiger had probably been stalking the deer in the forest and followed it into the woods," mused Parash.

"That must have been when we were plucking berries and waiting up on the trees," Gopal remarked. "So, there was a tiger in the woods after all. All the while we sat up on the trees and made our way through the woods, the tiger was stalking its prey, close to where we were." Even as the boys thought about it, they shuddered.

"And then, it must have chased it out of the woods and crossed the grasslands managing to kill it only near the bridge," Parash guessed.

"Then, how did we not encounter it as we came out of the woods?" Gopal asked.

"The woods are quite spread out. The quarry and the stalker must have emerged from another side."

"From where the *pheau* called out!" Khoka remarked. The boys looked at each other. They knew what that meant. All the while as they made their way along the river to reach the bridge the tiger was watching them as it guarded its prey which it had just killed. Even as they had stopped and contemplated about their next course of action just a few yards away from it, the tiger had been waiting. At first, it had been patient enough, probably hoping the boys would leave it alone to enjoy

its kill. It had no intention of attacking as tigers do not attack again once they've made a kill, unless they feel threatened in some way.

"And, that's exactly what happened," said Parash. "When you continued with your commotion at the bridge as you climbed, the tiger must have become frustrated at not being able to enjoy its kill and got impatient and then it attacked. It had been a full-grown, young female Royal Bengal Tiger!"

Khoka gulped and looked at Parash in surprise. "How do you know? The pugmarks have been washed away in the rain."

"Simple. By the teeth marks on the kill," Parash replied.

* * *

Malati smiled as she remembered Prahlad's reaction after hearing the story. It had still been raining and Prahlad's bad mood had come back. He had still wanted to go for the picnic and was angry with his school for cancelling it.

"It could be dangerous on a day like this, especially if you are going to be hiking," Malati had pointed out.

"You are always scared, Mom. There is no Usri river here that would get flooded. Nor are there any tigers," he had replied. "Besides, I like to go for picnics. I'm tired of playing on the streets; I don't like streets, I like paths; I like jungles to explore; and, I don't want to meet Aunty Nina's poodle, Sweetie on the street. I want to meet a real animal, a tiger or maybe, a bear or two as Khoka had done. I want to have a real adventure with a real river and not overflowing gutters where we sail paper boats."

As she remembered that day and the story, she thought that maybe the computer was not such a bad idea after all. It

might be able to give the boy an idea about the natural world. Virtual nature study, she thought. Could it replace the real thing?

Just then Prahlad came out. "Er . . . when did you say the forest camp was? Maybe I will go and see what it is all about, especially since you have already entered my name," he said it nonchalantly.

Actually Prahlad had also been thinking of the jungle adventure of Khoka when he went into his room after his argument with his mother. He couldn't concentrate on the computer and had come out. 'What is the harm in finding out how a jungle looks like in today's world? Of course it won't be untamed and full of wild animals as Khoka's adventure had described, but it would still be a jungle, wouldn't it?' he thought.

Sometimes genes are stronger than a computer, thought Malati happily as she hurried to get the brochure that the club had given her.

* * *

4

Prahlad and his mother waded through the currents of their daily routine, alternately supporting and frustrating each other. They each learnt to give some and take some, with the thread of Khoka's stories running through each event of import.

One day, Prahlad came home from school, earlier than usual. Malati, surprised to see him back so early, raised her eyebrows. She was even more surprised when four boys trooped in behind him. One of them, a smaller boy of about six was holding a miniature of the tri-colour. What struck her about them was their sombre faces. "Hello Aunty," they said in unison, but the usual cheer was missing.

They filed into the room and sat down quietly on the sofas. "What's the matter, children?" Malati asked knowing that all was not well. "Why are all of you back so early?" Still no one spoke.

Malati plonked herself on the settee facing the boys and waited. Something had happened to have upset them. She knew that they would speak eventually.

Bob Dylan was singing in the background. The song ended and the CD player shut itself off.

"Who was the singer, Aunty?" asked Arun, one of the boys who was Prahlad's classmate.

"Bob Dylan, an icon in the world of music of the 60s," Malati replied, relieved that someone had spoken. "His songs shook up an entire generation which was reeling under the

effects of war, strife and violence, a generation in search of an ideology."

"Why talk of the 60's, Aunty? It is 2006 now but is it any different? We seem to be in the same state today, though there hasn't been a major war," said Arun.

Malati knew she couldn't give a pat reply because the boys were intelligent enough to understand it if she did. She thought for a while.

"In a sense, yes, it is different. The world today is aware of the repercussions of war, any kind of violence for that matter and there is much being done towards world peace."

"We don't do such things, but there are people who are still doing all this and more. That's why a trainload of passengers was blown up this morning in Mumbai."

"What are you talking about?" Malati was stunned.

"And do you know that the effects of it are already being felt in our city? Anwar's father has downed the shutters of his shop because hooligans threatened to blow it up and Arun's uncle closed his factory to send the workers home safely, because it is in a Muslim locality?"

Malati was shocked at what her son was saying for she had been reading and listening to music and not switched on the TV since morning.

Prahlad walked up to the television and switched it on. What unfolded before their eyes was something unbelievable. A series of blasts in Mumbai local trains had left 210 people dead.

"The mobs have taken to the streets and are on a rampage in Mumbai. Riots are expected here sooner or later. Which is why school's been shut early and since my friends stay far away, I brought them home to wait out the riots if there are any," Prahlad told her.

Malati nodded. "Of course! Do I need to inform your parents?" she asked the boys.

"We have already spoken to them from school," replied Anwar. "This is my younger brother Ali. He's in prep school," he pointed to the little boy who stood shyly to one side. Ali had not understood any of the talk that was going on till then, but suddenly he was in focus. He smiled at her, twirling the small flag in his hand.

"Do you know what you are holding?" she asked.

"It is a flag," he said.

"That is our National Flag," Malati informed as the boy twirled the flag between his little fingers, thoughtfully.

"Do you know the name of your country?" she asked him.

"India!"

"Correct. And, that is India's flag," she said, pointing to it.

"But Ma'am said that we had a different flag before Indep . . . ."

"Independence. Before Independence the British ruled our country and we were forced to hoist the Union Jack. But even then we had the tricolour, though it had a charkha in the middle, not the Ashoka Chakra as we do now."

Ali was too small to understand but the others looked at Malati.

Suddenly Arun shot out, "What is the point, Aunty? Its Independence Day tomorrow and we have a holiday, right? We will hoist the flag, sing the National Anthem and then get out on the streets and shoot each other!"

"Or blow up trains."

"Or demolish temples and mosques!"

The boys sounded agitated and hungry! She had completely forgotten about their lunch!

"Prahlad, can you get some juice out of the fridge while I make some sandwiches? We will talk as we eat," she said briskly, getting up.

"Aunty, we have our lunch with us!" said Anwar.

"We will have a picnic then!" she said cheerfully as she went in to the kitchen.

Fifteen minutes later she came back with a tray piled high with sandwiches which she put on the dining table. Prahlad had set out the glasses and was pouring orange juice into them.

"So Arun, you were saying that things haven't changed. I agree with you that there are problems in the country. But, every nation has its problems. Does it mean that we just sit back and lament, complain or criticize about them? Don't we

have any responsibility? Look at what we are doing besides blaming our leaders or each other!"

"But what can we do about issues like terrorism, unemployment or external aggression on our borders?"

"I agree that we can't be responsible for everything. But, terrorism arises due to a lack of both moral and social values, the responsibility for which lies with the individual. A group of anti-social people propagate misplaced values and create dangerous events for their own selfish reasons. And the innocent masses suffer the consequences. But for every such person, there are five others who uphold the virtues of humankind and the ideals of our country. We should be proud that we are Indians and definitely celebrate each and every important date in the nation's history." Malati walked up to Ali and took the little flag from him.

"Saare Jahan se Achha Hindustan Hamara," she said with theatrical flourish, raising her arm and holding the little flag as high as she could.

And suddenly she was reminded of the young boy who many years back had similarly felt impotent and helpless and had reacted in his own innocent manner towards what he had considered was an injustice done to his country.

"There is a need to understand the sacrifices of the past, which have given you the freedom to speak today. Prahlad, why don't you get the diary and we will all read a story that might provide you with some answers?"

"A story?" asked Prahlad, a little sceptical, but at the same time curious to know which story it was going to be today. He had got used to the life of Khoka and started feeling a kinship with him, though their lives were so different in every respect, not to speak of the time period that separated them.

And as the story unfolded, the little group of five was slowly transported back in time . . . .

5

Giridih—Dinner had been served later than usual that night. Normally the schedule of the household ran with clockwork precision. It couldn't be because someone who managed the kitchen was ill, since all the aunts were present, hovering around the dining table, catering to their respective husbands. There were no guests either, with just the sixteen members of the household being present. Khoka counted them to be sure.

"Perhaps, someone has to leave early tomorrow," suggested Nimu.

"In that case, dinner should have been early, not late. And, why would the entire household be held to ransom on growling stomachs?" reasoned Khoka.

It was not just dinner, but everything else seemed to be a little unusual too. Usually, once the men had eaten, they retired to their respective rooms to read, work or simply go off to sleep. The women would have their dinner exchanging bits of gossip, wrap up any pending chores and then sit around to prepare their post-dinner beetel leaves.

Tonight, none of the above was happening. The men had assembled in what was commonly referred to as the 'Radio Room,' where members of the household gathered occasionally to hold important family discussions. But mostly it served as a lounge.

Apart from the radio that occupied the pride of place, the room also doubled up as the library. Stacks and stacks of books lined the walls of the room. It was a sacrosanct room which the maids and even the women of the household left alone, with the result that it was rarely tidied up. For a house that was otherwise neat and clean, this room was a study in contrast. It was normally in disarray, with books and leaflets strewn all over the floor and empty tea cups lying on the tables for days without anyone bothering to pick them up. It was a room where many a heated argument took place, fists were banged and opinions clashed. Occasionally, the room would also serve as a Sunday afternoon retreat when a member of the household could be found lazing around, sipping tea and reading peacefully.

It was in this room where the men now lingered. Manoranjan Ghosh or Boro Mama—as all the children called him save his own—lit his pipe and lowered himself in the huge armchair, next to the radio. Mejo Mama, second in line and also known as Manik Ratan Ghosh sat on the divan, next to his elder brother. Chhoto Mama or Mohan Ghosh was continuously fiddling with the radio. No one seemed to be in a hurry to turn in for the night. It sure was unusual.

"What's up?" Nimu's curiosity was getting the better of him. "I think I'll go and ask."

"And they will, of course, tell you," Khoka said sarcastically.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the main door. The boys rushed out to see who it was at this late hour.

"Wait!" Chhoto Mama thundered. "I'll see to it."

It was their neighbour, Parash. He was hurriedly ushered into the radio room and the door was shut

behind him. Hushed, animated whispers could be heard. After about five minutes he left in the same manner as he had come—suddenly, hurriedly and surreptitiously.

The boys watched the entire drama from behind the curtains outside the door, perplexed at the unusual activities of that night. From time to time, Chhoto Mama and Ajit *Da*, Manoranjan Ghosh's elder son, who was almost twenty and was counted as one of the adults,

would go up to the radio and fiddle with the knobs. Assorted sounds of a shriek, wail or hiss or a burst of static would be heard briefly and then fade out.

The women meanwhile gathered in the inner courtyard, talking excitedly.

There was obviously something going on, only the children didn't know what it was all about.

"I wish I knew what was happening," Nimu said again.

"They are all acting rather suspiciously," added Khoka who was equally curious. "Forget it. We are far more resourceful than the adults and could have helped them, whatever it is that they are doing. But, they are not interested in involving us. It's just too bad. Let's get some sleep," Khoka shrugged as though he didn't care and turned to Nimu.

"Are you coming or are you going to hang around here all night?"

Nimu tore himself from his spot behind the curtains and the children were about to turn and leave when suddenly, Ajit *Da* called Jhunu inside. Jhunu was Manik Ratan Ghosh's daughter.

"Now we'll know," Sarat exclaimed excitedly. "Jhunu, you better come back with all the information, down to the last detail, or you know what will happen, don't you?"

Jhunu nodded. She knew what bullies the boys were. But, tonight her nod was a little more confident. After all tonight, she was the chosen one. She now strode in proudly.

"Why her?" Sarat asked the others.

"Who knows? And, who cares?" Khoka assumed a nonchalant air about him. He was dying to be inside

with the elders, but since he had not been the chosen one, the best he could do was to pretend that he didn't care about it.

"I'm going to sleep. Want to come?"

"Wait till we at least know what's up when Jhunu comes out."

After what seemed like an endless wait, Jhunu emerged feeling like a heroine, bursting with information. She could barely contain herself till she reached the little group huddled outside the room, behind the curtains.

"Tell us quickly what they told you?" Sarat urged, forgetting to whisper.

If they were found lurking there, the children would be reprimanded severely. Jhunu looked at them with a grin on her face.

"Will you tell us or not?" Nimu asked, tapping his foot, his lips set in a thin line. Jhunu was testing his patience. Jhunu was enjoying her moment of importance, thoroughly. She took a deep breath. Everyone else held theirs.

"*Jethamoshai* said," she paused. And, looked around the little expectant group waiting for the pearls to drop from her mouth.

"Go to bed," she whispered.

"That we will, you don't worry. Tell us what they told you, fast." It was a command from Sarat.

"I told you just now." Jhunu replied innocently.

"What?"

"What *Jethamoshai* said? He told me to tell you all to go to bed real fast."

"Okay, okay," Nimu said impatiently, "and after that . . . ?"

"Nothing after that. That's all he said," Jhunu wondered why they were not believing what she said. And suddenly, she turned around and sprinted lest one of the boys caught and spanked her. Just then, Khoka's mother arrived at the scene. She found the boys rooted to the spot reeling from the anticlimax of Jhunu's words.

"Children, what are you doing here? You must go to bed. It is nearly eleven. Don't you have to go to school tomorrow?"

"No, tomorrow is a Sunday," they replied in a chorus, dejectedly.

"Well, nevertheless, it is late. Go to sleep." Labonya said sternly.

Khoka had hardly gone to sleep when he found himself being shaken awake. At first he thought it was a dream. Then slowly, Nimu's voice filtered through layers of sleep and when he opened his eyes, he found Nimu standing by his bed.

"What is the matter? Why are you here?" Khoka mumbled in his sleep.

"Hush, don't raise your voice. Come with me," Nimu whispered.

"Where?" Khoka was groggy. "What time is it?" he asked.

"Nearly one in the morning," Nimu replied.

Before he knew it, he found himself being pulled along by Nimu and once again hiding behind the curtains of the radio room.

"Why are we here?" Khoka was irritated with Nimu for having dragged him all the way and then posting him in a completely dark room. But, his curiosity got the better of him. The radio room seemed completely

dark and there seemed to be no activity inside it. He tried peering in, but Nimu pulled him back.

And suddenly there was a hiss. He strained his ears, but all he heard was the hiss.

"Is that a snake?" asked Khoka, still fighting off waves of sleepiness.

"There is no sn . . . ," Nimu would have laughed, but was stopped shortly. They heard it again, much louder this time.

"Let's go back," Nimu said nervously. He suddenly seemed to have lost his nerve.

"No way! Hush! Listen!" Khoka was wide awake now and assumed the position of authority. Suddenly, they heard a shriek, like a whistle.

"I'm going back, are you coming . . . ?"

"Wait a minute . . . that sound is familiar. Of course!" He nearly jumped as he recognised the sound.

"The radio! It's the radio! It sounds like that when we try tuning in to stations," Khoka almost spoke aloud, such was his relief. He strained his ears further and now that he knew what it was.

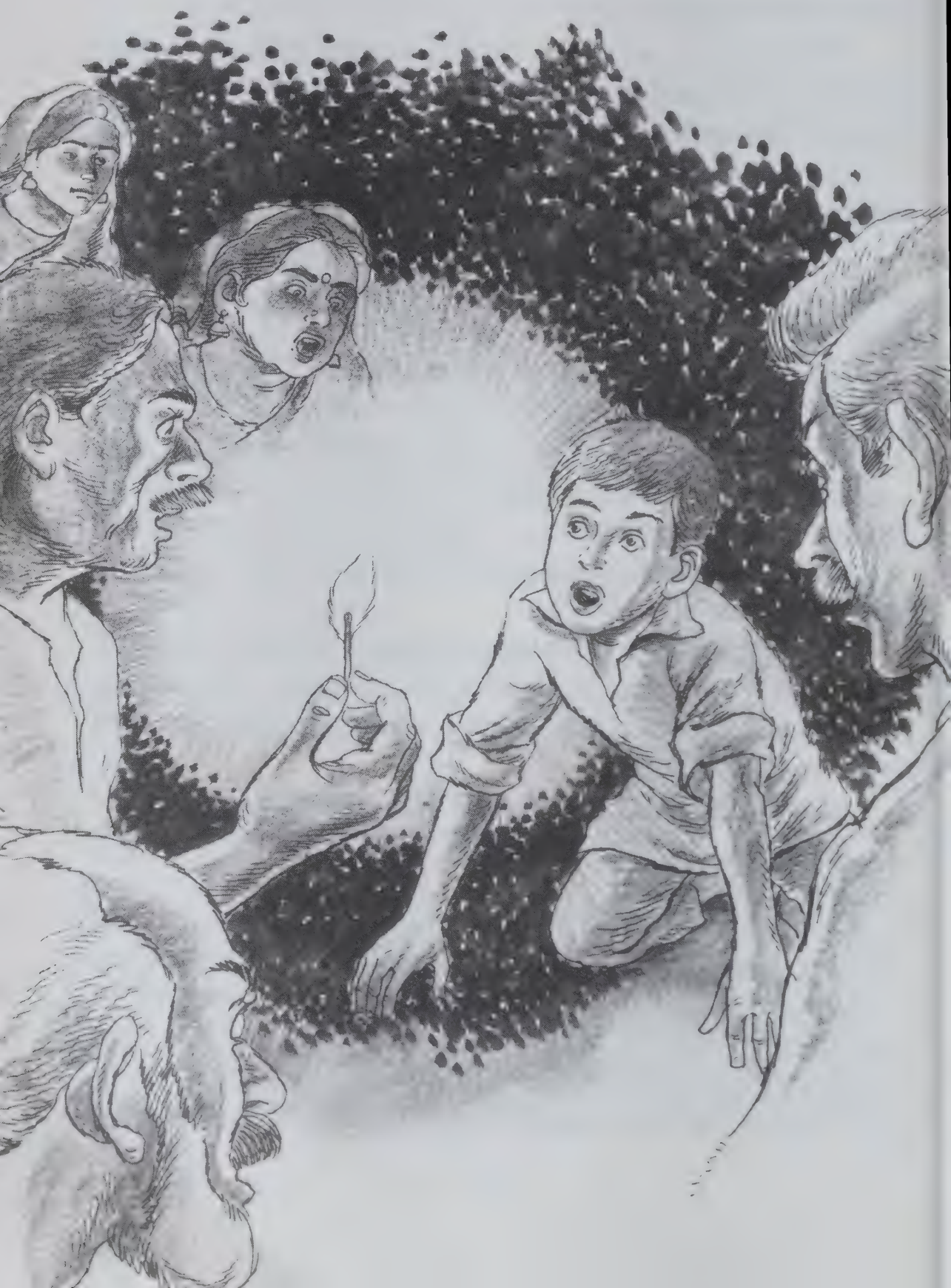
All of a sudden a forceful voice — neither too deep nor loud — came on. Amidst the crackling and whistling of the air waves, they heard words which were to become famous later:

'Give me your blood and I will give you freedom.'

It was a hot night outside, but Khoka felt a shiver run down his spine.

Whose voice was it? Whose blood was to be spilt? Khoka knew he had to find out. He emerged from behind the curtains and crept into the room before Nimu could stop him. It was pitch dark inside and in the darkness he could make out nothing. As he crawled his way in, his foot banged against something hard.

"Ouch," he cried before he could stop himself. Someone struck a match and lit the lamp, and in the dim glow Khoka saw the whole family gathered in the room, all except the children. Some neighbours were there as well.



"What are you doing here? Are you not supposed to be in bed?" someone asked.

"Yes, but . . . ," Khoka stammered.

"Leave the child alone," Manoranjan Ghosh's voice boomed across the room. "And, put off the lamp."

The room plunged into darkness once more. The excitement over Khoka's discovery was soon forgotten and once again, all ears were tuned to the radio. Khoka found himself mesmerised by the voice. It exhorted the youth to come forward and fight.

> 'Indians should themselves come forward to pay the price of liberty. This is total war—not merely a war between two armies. We should have but one desire today—the desire to die so that India may live—the desire to face a martyr's death so that the path to freedom may be paved with the martyr's blood.
>
> Friends/my comrades in the war of liberation! Today, I demand of you blood. It is blood alone that can avenge the blood that the enemy has spilt. It is blood alone that can pay the price of freedom. Give me blood and I promise you freedom!
>
> Every Indian should feel proud that this army, his own army has been organised under Indian leadership and that when the historic moment arrives, under Indian leadership it will go to battle. India's Army of Liberation will not only emancipate India from British yoke, but will create the future National Army of Free India.'

The night wore on. Outside, it was as silent and dark as it was inside the room. Nothing stirred. No owls hooted, no crickets chirped. Only the voice rang out in the stillness of the night and the radio crackled and hissed now and then.

'This is your own army. Our army—Azad Hind Fauj. Comrades! Soldiers! Let your battle-cry be—To Delhi, to Delhi!'

Finally, after a long while, the voice faded out and after a pause, a clearer voice came on.

"That was Subhash Chandra Bose speaking to all Indians. This transmission was relayed to you from Saigon." The radio was switched off.

Outside, the first light of dawn filtered through the window and the first stirrings of life could be heard, the birds chirping with the morning breeze rustling the leaves of the mango trees behind the house.

Inside the room it was still dark. The lamp was lit again. Khoka felt a great wonder of having heard Netaji's voice.

In the course of the next few months, the Ghosh family listened in the same hush-hush manner, to the speeches that were relayed from Germany, Singapore, Vietnam, and later, from Burma. Anybody caught listening to Netaji's speeches would be jailed forthwith. Since it was only Manoranjan Ghosh's house that had a radio in that area, his family was one of the privileged few to have heard these speeches secretly. There was no electricity back then and the radio was rigged up to the car battery. Their house was one of the few in the town with a radio as well as a car.

Over the next few weeks, Khoka's mind was in a whirl. He knew that India was ruled by the British. He

was hardly eleven but he had been exposed to some of the best scholars and thinkers of the time, since Hazaribagh, which was in the Bengal Presidency at the time, was a centre of not just nationalist politics, but was also an intellectual and cultural melting pot.

It was home to some of the greatest Indian intellectuals including social reformers, educationists and famous writers such as Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, Bolai Chand Mukhopadhyay, who wrote under the pen-name Bonophool, and Probodh Sanyal.

Khoka's mother Labonya's family was a distinguished one. Narendranath Ghosh, Khoka's maternal grandfather, headed the Hazaribagh Municipal Corporation. His father had been jailor of the Hazaribagh Central Jail, which later played a very important role in the freedom struggle as it housed such eminent freedom fighters like Rajendra Prasad and Jai Prakash Narayan among others.

Khoka had often quietly sat at the various meetings that were convened in the Ghosh family's home, both at Hazaribagh and Giridih. In Hazaribagh, Khoka had met social thinkers and scholars such as Braja Kumar Niyogi, Dhirendranath Choudhury and Mahesh Chandra Ghosh, who often visited the Ghosh family. His own uncle Subodh Ghosh, later went on to become a celebrated writer. He knew of Keshab Chandra Sen, the great leader of the Brahmo Samaj, after whom the city library had been named.,

Manoranjan Ghosh, Narendranath Ghosh's eldest son had moved along with two of his younger brothers to Giridih, a delightful little town in the Hazaribagh district. Khoka spent most of his childhood here.

Now, as the nightly vigils continued, he gradually

began to understand the significance of various national policies and their repercussions on the freedom struggle, as well as on the common man.

He knew about Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. He had often heard his uncles argue about each and every move of Gandhi and debated over his political

decisions. Khoka clearly remembered the time when Gandhi had organised the Non-Cooperation Movement against the British.

Boro Mama had been in favour of it. "This should teach the British a lesson!"

But, Ajit *Da* and Chhoto Mama hadn't agreed. They responded to Subhash Bose's call instead.

"Bose Babu has correctly understood the need of the hour. If he gets help from the Germans, his objective of creating a national army can be realised," Chhoto Mama had declared.

Boro Mama shook his head slowly. "My dear Mohan, nothing comes out of violence. You see how the Non-Cooperation Movement will affect the British."

"On the contrary, Dada, Gandhi's pacifist tactics only help to serve the British cause. What is needed is military might," Chhoto Mama had reiterated.

Bose had been elected the president of the Congress party two years back (two years before the non-cooperation movement), much against Gandhi's wishes. That was when the rift had started.

"Bose and Gandhi have one thing in common, though," said Mejo Mama, who was not too happy with the disharmony between the political strategies of both leaders. "Both have the capability to change ideas into realities. If they could somehow reach a middle path . . . ," he mused.

"That is not possible, we know. Though Subhash Babu respects Gandhi, he's getting increasingly disappointed with the latter's dilly dallying and round table conferences," said Chhoto Mama.

After three or four years of serious differences

between the two, Subhash Bose parted ways with the leaders of the nationalist movement, mapped his own course of action. He left the country in 1941.

"He is in exile. The government's after him," Chhoto Mama informed Khoka.

Khoka learnt that disguised and alone, Netaji had traversed the North-West Frontier Province of Punjab, Sind and Afghanistan and finally reached Germany where Subhash Bose joined hands with Mussolini and Hitler, and the latter, though hesitant at first, eventually offered him his unconditional support.

While Boro Mama was not too happy with this, Chhoto Mama and Ajit *Da* were happy.

"There's nothing wrong in it, I think," retorted Chhoto Mama. "After all, both men have a common objective. Hitler's to destroy Britain and end their colonial supremacy over half the world. Bose's to oust the British out of his motherland."

"Bose is astute enough to have realised that India can achieve political freedom only if it has political, military and diplomatic support from outside," remarked Chhoto Mama.

"And, don't worry," said Ajit *Da*. "He has managed to extract two promises from the dictator. One, that he would be allowed and helped with a safe passage back to India. The other is that the Indian Prisoners Of War (POW) in Germany would be released and treated fairly."

The German submarines—the U-boats ferried him across the oceans till Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Here, he was joined by the Japanese navy which accompanied him till Japan.

One day, Chhoto Mama came home excited. He

gathered the men in the radio room once again. Sarat, who had been lurking nearby, hurried to inform Khoka and Nimu of this clandestine meeting. The boys had begun sitting unobtrusively in the far corners of the room and listened in on the discussions. No one asked them to leave.

"Bose Babu has met Rash Behari in Japan!"

Rash Behari Bose was the leader of the Independent Indian League. When the two men met there had been an instant bonding.

They were both Indians, both rebels, both passionate with similar beliefs and a common enemy. Rash Behari knew he had found his successor and the Indian Liberation Army merged with Subhash's Azad Hind Fauj.

"And, came to be known as the Indian National Army!" said Chhoto Mama.

"Our very own army," Khoka exclaimed from the far corner.

"Our very own army with Indian commanding officers and Subhash Babu as its chief," Chhoto Mama informed him.

With the formation of the Indian National Army, another dimension was added to India's struggle for freedom.

"The Brits are getting jittery. They were laughing earlier, but their laughs are getting increasingly hollow," he said, grinning.

"Yeah, for the first time, there is a leader, who is heading a proper, well-trained professional army," agreed Ajit da.

"And a rather dynamic one at that. He is young, highly-educated, completely dedicated and is a good orator."

"And fights well. Probably, the only political leader to actually lead his men to the front himself, to be present in the battlefield," Ajit *Da* said.

Bose had forsaken everything for the cause: an illustrious bureaucratic career, his family, his love.

'I don't think one can be loyal to the British Raj and yet serve India honestly, heart and soul,' he had said.

Now, as he travelled with the Japanese from Vietnam to Singapore and then to Burma, Bose never failed to keep in touch with his beloved countrymen through radio broadcasts. This became possible once the Free India Radio went on air.

For Bose, the fall of Singapore to the Japanese on 15 February 1942, was the signal to broadcast his first speech on 19 February, the same year.

'The fall of Singapore, means the collapse of the British Empire, the end of the iniquitous regime which it has symbolized and the dawn of a new era in Indian history. Through India's liberation will Asia and the world move forward towards the larger goal of human emancipation,' Bose's voice rang out.

It was over a year since Bose had left the frontiers of his beloved motherland. And, it was only through the radio broadcasts, which were transmitted in seven South Asian languages from a powerful Philips transmitter at Huizen in the Netherlands that Bose reached out to his countrymen. Indians eagerly waited for his voice calling out:

'This is Subhash Chandra Bose speaking to you over the Azad Hind Radio.'

Germany had released all its Indian Prisoners of War (POW), who now fought for India's independence by Bose's side.

"How wretched had they been fighting someone else's war. Now they don't care any longer even if they die," sighed Ajit *Da*. Chhoto Mama nodded. "Yes, they are now willing to die for their own country, their own motherland."

As days passed, Khoka grew impatient to know more about Subhash Bose and his Indian National Army. He never missed a single radio broadcast nor failed to follow any news regarding him.

By now, Bose's action plan was widely known and many Indians in the country and abroad were supporting him in whatever way they could—with money, logistics and manpower.

"The Japanese have withdrawn their support. Subhash Babu's men are fighting out alone there. This is the first time that we Indians have our own army. Our soldiers need support in every form—ration, ammunition, transport. Subhash Babu has achieved what no one else has—to form our own military. Should not the Indian nationalist leaders support him, instead of engaging in polite arguments with the British?" Chhoto Mama was furious.

"The British are laughing at us. They think we are fools. We just don't have it in us to look them in the eye and match step for step. The Brits are quite comfortable with Gandhi's non-violent protests."

"Yes. But, you notice fear in their eyes the moment Bose Babu and the Indian National Academy (INA) are mentioned. If a handful of men could create terror in the hearts of the Brits, how much more effective would Bose's battle be with the support of our nationalist leaders?" said Mejo Mama, who had just walked into the room with his evening cup of tea.

Everyone in the room was surprised to hear him talk like in this vein. He had disagreed with Bose's methods till then. Then, how did this turnaround come about?

"Isn't it the duty of every Indian to stand behind Bose Babu and offer every kind of support there is? After all Bose has achieved what no one has been able to," he continued.

Bose, although disagreeing with Gandhi over political tactics, looked towards him for moral support. In one of the broadcasts from Azad Hind Radio, he appealed to Gandhi for his support.

'Troops of Azad Hind Fauj are now fighting on the soil of India. India's last War of Independence has begun. Father of our Nation in this holy war of India's liberation we ask for your blessings and good wishes.'

Khoka understood that Gandhi, despite his popularity with the masses, had his critics. But his Quit India Movement had been received well by all Indians. Khoka knew that Gandhi, like Bose was only trying to throw out the British by adopting different means.

"If both are fighting for the same cause, why do some Indians, including our uncles, disagree with him?" Khoka asked Sarat.

"Obviously, there must be reasons for that," said Sarat wisely but none the wiser.

One day, Parash rushed in. "Did anyone listen to Bose's speech last night?" he asked panting.

"No. We didn't switch the radio on last night. *Boudi's* not well, so we didn't want to disturb her," said Chhoto Mama. "Why, what happened?"

"Bose's speech was broadcast from Berlin last night. He spoke strangely," replied Parash.

"What did he say? Is all well?"

"Apparently not. There are rumours that the British tried to assassinate Bose. He reassured us. It went somewhat like this—'This is Subhash Bose, who is still alive, speaking to you over the Azad Hind Radio'."

The men were aghast. Trying to kill Bose? Were the British really that scared of him?

"They would be, naturally," said Ajit *Da*. "They know how serious Bose is about throwing them out from his motherland. And, they also know that he's capable of it."

"Yes, I know," said Khoka suddenly. "I clearly remember one particular speech of his, some months ago. 'To my countrymen I say, forget not the grossest crime is to compromise with injustice and wrong'." Khoka had memorised these lines.

Although newly inspired by patriotism and bursting with the urge to be a part of the nationalist movement, there was nothing much Khoka could do.

But one day in 1942, after a few weeks of listening to Netaji, Khoka was inspired to show his support for the freedom movement. He went to the Kutchery building with two of his cousins. The Kutchery, as the district court was known in Hindi, was a major hub of British activity. Khoka and his cousins picked up stones from the road, big and small, and threw them at the building with all their might, shouting *'Bharat Chhoro,'* and ran back as fast as their small legs could carry them.

Back home, they told their mothers what they had done, who were aghast. Without any delay, they reported the matter to the men. When Khoka and cousins continued the stone throwing for three consecutive days, they were summoned one evening

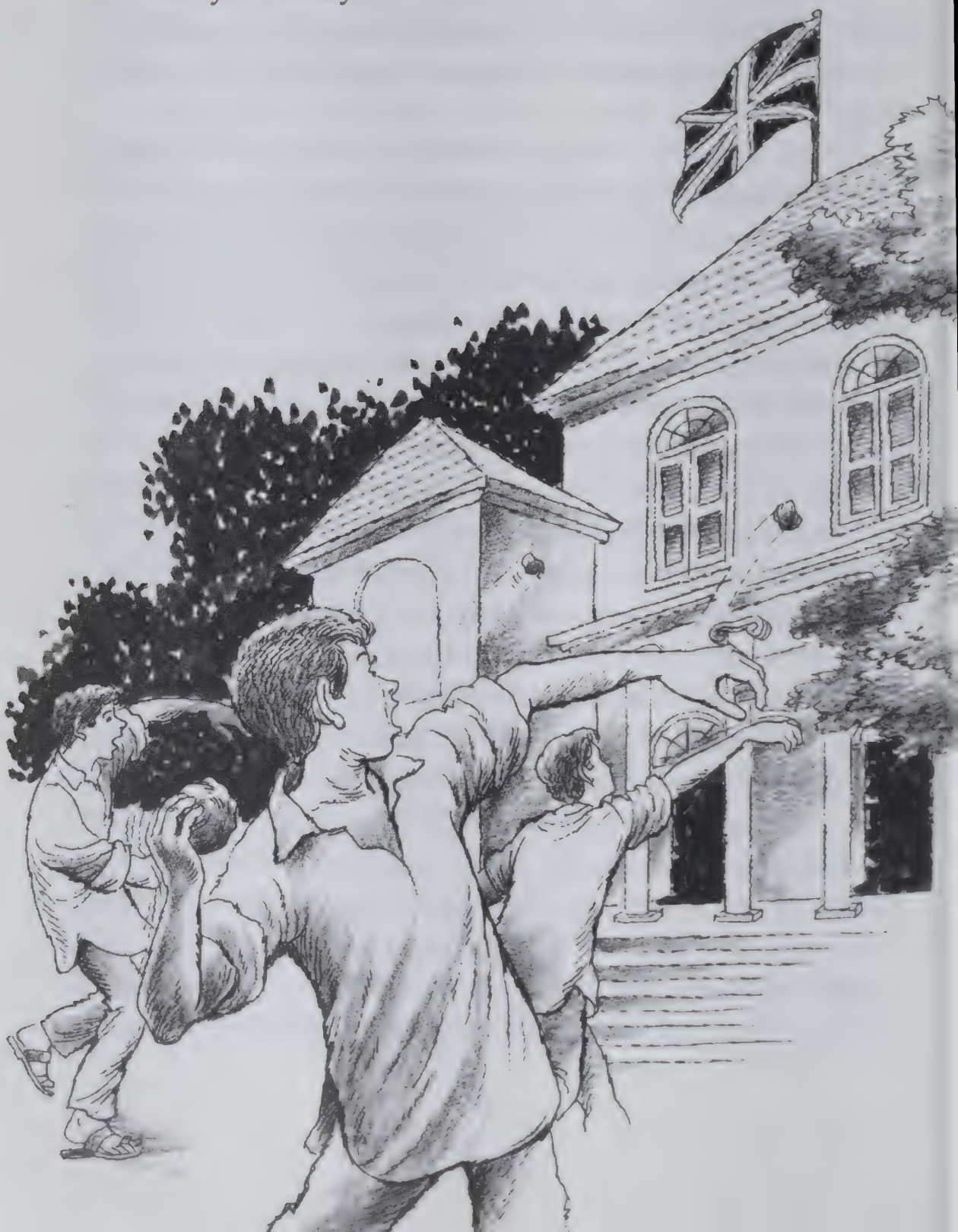
to the radio room. As they faced the elders, their heads bent, Nimu was quick to apologise.

"We are sorry," he said in anticipation. Khoka cast him a scornful glance. He wanted to shout at him, but restrained himself in his uncle's presence.

"Khoka, are you sorry, too?"

Khoka was silent.

"Are you sorry?"



"No," Khoka replied. "The British will have to go."

Manoranjan Ghosh smiled. "Good. Netaji's speeches are working. Keep up the anger. Anger towards injustice, and towards what is wrong, should always be there. It is good that you feel so. But, be careful. These are dangerous times. Anyone who says a word against the British is put in jail. You are too young to fight for freedom today. But when you grow up, respect the word freedom—your own, others' and your country's."

The next week when Khoka went to attend his Boy Scout class, he found teacher Nand Kishore Bhattacharya unfurling the Indian flag. Khoka loved being a Boy Scout. It used to give him tremendous pride and courage to see the Union Jack flying and singing 'God Save the King.'

But not anymore. Over the past few weeks, as he was gradually being sucked into national politics with Subhash Chandra Bose's speeches instilling in him an overwhelming sense of patriotism, his mind had begun to clear. That day, when he saw the Indian flag fluttering in the wind, he felt ashamed to remember that all these days he had bowed his head to the English crown.

"Children, from today we will sing Vande Mataram. Jai Hind!" Bhattacharya's voice rang out.

And thereafter, at the risk of being shot or least jailed, Nand Kishore Bhattacharya and his Boy Scouts of Hazaribagh continued singing Vande Mataram.

* * *

Malati looked at the boys across the dining table. The plates in front of them were almost empty, the contents from the lunch boxes having disappeared too, so immersed had they been in the story.

She smiled. "Do you know something? Gandhi and Bose, despite differing in their political ideologies, respected each other very much. It was Bose who gave Gandhi the title of Father of the Nation. And, it was Gandhi who first called Bose Netaji," said Malati.

Prahlad, meanwhile seemed to be preoccupied. Suddenly, he asked, "What is wrong in singing Vande Mataram? We sing it in school every day."

"It is fine today but was not when the British ruled us. Vande Mataram was the war cry of the freedom movement. Singing it was considered an act of rebellion."

"And, did you know that it was the INA that first used the term Jai Hind?" she asked.

"Really? Today, Jai Hind is used as a greeting in their day-to-day communications by the Armed Forces. They begin and end all their conversations and speeches with that," observed Prahlad.

"Where did you learn that?" asked Malati astonished.

"The internet. You get to learn so many interesting things from it!" Prahlad replied in an accusatory tone. He had not forgotten her objections to it when he had first got his own laptop.

"And, finally the British left!" Arun said.

"Yes, on 15 August, 1947, after many Indians lost their lives to give us the freedom that we are enjoying today. That is the day we celebrate our Independence Day. Now you know why we have a holiday tomorrow, Ali?"

Ali nodded, not understanding completely. The rest sat quietly. Malati got up to clear the table.

"How about some milkshake?" she asked brightly. The boys enthusiastically agreed.

The mayhem continued in Mumbai, but barring a few stray cases of looting and arson, nothing much happened to add to

the tension in Hyderabad that day. By evening, the boys' parents arrived and took them home.

After his friends had left, Prahlad went back to the sofa once again. Normally, this was one of his favourite places and he would often curl up on it.

"Did Netaji die?" Prahlad suddenly asked.

"Yes, he did. But, no one knows when and where, though it is believed that he died in a plane crash over Taiwan."

"And, what about Khoka? Was he jailed for throwing stones?"

"No. He was only a child then."

"Mom, who was Khoka?"

Malati smiled. "You will find out one day soon," she smiled.

"Aw come on! You always put me off when I ask you," he said but didn't press further. He picked the diary up and took it back to his desk.

* * *

Prahlad got Richard's Bicycle Book *on his previous birthday as a gift from his father. He had a BSA sports bicycle which he only rode in the neighbourhood, since his mother wouldn't let him take it out on the busy main road.*

"Come on Mom. I am not a child anymore. Let us try it out. It's an environment-friendly mode of transport. There is no pollution and it is good for keeping fit," he replied.

When it looked as if she wouldn't budge, he pleaded, "We will keep to the side roads, and the main roads have cycle lanes. We will keep to those, promise! Mom, please!"

But Malati was adamant about not allowing him to go to school on the bicycle. There were regular arguments over this with neither of them giving in. Prahlad went around in a sulk and refused to speak to his mother.

Then, one day, while looking for something in his cupboard,

Prahlad saw the blue diary. It had been a while since he had read something from it. He picked it up and flipped through the pages, and suddenly, stopped. He had found the perfect thing to swing his mother's decision his way.

"Yes! This should do the trick," Prahlad jumped and punched the air with his clenched fist. 'When I was younger, she used to read from the diary and make me do things, now let me try the same trick on her. Who knows, she might even let me ride to school?' he thought, and ran to his mother.

When Malati saw the diary in his hand, she had no clue about his intentions. But her look softened. Did he want to read another story or had he read one and hoped the diary would help smooth the tension between them. She raised her eyebrows.

"Mom, look what I found in the diary. Just listen to this! Shall I read it or will you?" asked Prahlad.

"No, you read it Prahlad," she said smiling. He had a good voice and dramatics had taught him to modulate it with suitable inflections and tones while reading.

Prahlad settled himself on the sofa after getting his mother a couple of cushions to make her comfortable on the couch. He cleared his throat and started reading the story of a group of young boys who went on an adventure tour on their bicycles around the rocky terrain of the Chhota Nagpur Plateau.

* * *

6

It was a bright day in March when six boys set off on their sturdy Hercules bicycles to explore the red sands and ochre rocks of the Khandwa hills in the Chhotanagpur plateau. It had been Khoka's idea to start with, and all his cousins as well as some friends were roped in.

It had all started when Khoka was cycling near the Usri one day, admiring the breathtaking scenery. Khoka had often wondered how it would feel to explore the area— the vast expanses of grasslands and forests, the undulating meadows, the red earth of the plateau and the countless streams that trickled down the hillsides and meandered their way across the plains of Bihar.

The Usri Falls was the boy's favourite spot to spend a lazy afternoon. One day as they were lazing around on the rocks Sarat mused, "It's always so pleasant here. I wish I could stay here the whole day, away from Ma's nagging!" between mouthfuls of *halwa.*

"We could get away, you know. Just imagine what a wonderful thing it would be if we could explore the whole area by ourselves!" Khoka said before diving into the cold water of the Usri. Nimu was already splashing about. When he emerged and sat on the rock Sarat asked, "What did you mean by getting away?"

"We could go on a trip by ourselves and thereby get away from the elders and their scoldings," said Khoka.

The boys looked at Khoka, aghast.

"Are you mad? They won't allow us," Sarat shook his head.

"We'll see about that. But, first let's see if we agree on going," Khoka said.

Everyone agreed, naturally. After some discussion, they decided that they would make the trip on bicycles and restrict themselves to the state of Bihar circling around the Chhotanagpur plateau. It would be a round trip of approximately ten days.

"Moloy and Gopal might be interested in joining us," Khoka suggested. The boys lived in the neighbourhood and were good friends with the cousins. They decided to leave Benu behind since he was too young.

Khoka, who had spent many a night mentally planning the expedition now decided to let them in on the secret.

"By the way, I've got permission for the trip," he announced nonchalantly.

"I don't believe it," said Sarat incredulously. "How did you manage it?"

Khoka smiled mysteriously. "Ah, let's say we have got the permission to go, shall we?" he said. The only condition that the adults put was that they would not ride in the dark and make night halts.

They needed a map and a route and decided to ask Uncle Dhanua for help. An adventurer at heart, he had secretly hoped to be included in the tour. But the boys had never thought about it since adults were strictly prohibited on this trip!

He had hand-drawn the map and planned the route and stop-overs for them.

But, after all the planning, just a few days before the proposed trip, Khoka fell ill and his mother refused to allow him to go on the trip.

"We'll postpone our journey by a few days. By then, you'll be okay, I'm sure," suggested Sarat and Khoka could have hugged him for the suggestion.

There had been a last minute addition to the group in the form of Alok, the younger brother of Ajit *Da.* He studied at a boarding school in Darjeeling and had arrived home for the holidays only two days before the cycle tour was scheduled to start. The moment he heard of the tour, he wanted to join in. The original group was reluctant to take him along. Ever since he had gone away to the hostel, he had become patronizing towards his cousins, as if he were superior to them in some way. The others resented this behaviour and they usually had to spend the entire holidays to bring him down to earth.

Taking him along would mean enduring his comments and attitude all through the trip. They tried to discourage him from joining them taking care to not alert the elders to their scheming. After all, he was here on vacation and they had been told in no uncertain terms by the elders that they had to be nice to him. They would be polite and include him in their games and plans for the first few days but he would slowly begin getting on their nerves with his insufferable attitude.

So now, they tried being polite. "You know Alok; it's going to be really hot out there. You are used to the hills," Sarat informed him solicitously.

"And, we will have a hectic schedule. You are here on vacation. Just relax at home. You have enough adventure anyway in boarding school!" Khoka gave a fake laugh.

Alok was not ready to be put off. "I want to come along. What will I do all alone at home?"

The boys looked at each other. "The more, the merrier," Sarat finally sighed with an air of resignation. ``We are going as a team and no tantrum would be entertained," he added firmly though. Chastised, Alok agreed.

On 16 March, in the year 1945, six boys aged between 12 and 17 set off on their grand cycle tour.

Within the first two hours of setting off, they came across the river Barakar and cycled along the bank for about an hour till they came to a bridge. Khoka stopped and looked around, as if confused.

"What is the matter?" Sarat asked.

"We have missed something," Khoka looked around him as though searching for it.

"Let's carry on. We have a long way to go," Sarat said impatiently.

"I know Barhi town!" cried out Khoka suddenly. "There is a bridge that is being constructed over there by the American troops. We must have skirted it since we went along the river. We must locate it or we will lose our way. But, before that . . . ," he jumped into the river and began splashing about grinning. The others soon followed. The waters of the Barakar were cool and refreshing. The March sun can get quite fierce around noon in the plains and plateau of Chhota Nagpur.

Alok would have loved to go back then and there to the cool confines of home, but that would make him the instant object of ridicule. He would rather brave the tortures of the elements than the scorn of his cousins. He cursed his luck for having come along and continued.

They had decided before setting out that they would not be eating much during the day as it would tire them out and make it difficult to cycle, but have a heavy dinner before turning in for the night.

"But, where would we get to eat a heavy dinner?" Khoka asked.

"At some Bengali's home," Sarat was quite clear in his mind about that!

"Where would we find a Bengali home every night in Bihar?"

"Oh, there are plenty of them, trust me." Sarat said confidently.

The boys bathed in the river and ate *chapatis* with jaggery which they had got from home. They took a short nap in the cool shade of the Sal grove, next to the river. Having started very early they slept a little more than they had thought they would and when they finally awoke, they realised that they had just a couple of hours left before sundown, following which their primary objective was to find a Bengali home!

"Let us get to Barhi town before dark. How far is it?" Gopal wanted to know.

Khoka shrugged. "Maybe, an hour or so. We must ask someone." But they couldn't find anyone to ask.

"Anyway, let's follow the map. We go eastwards." Khoka said, as he spread out the map before them.

The Barhi Bridge was being constructed near the town of Barhi by the Americans for their military convoys to pass southwards towards Burma. The boys were excited about seeing it.

"There it is!" Khoka exclaimed suddenly.

They could see the outline of the bridge a kilometre or so away. As they drew closer, they saw that

construction was still going on with a lot of local labourers, with some Americans giving them orders.

"We might get to see one or two convoys pass," Khoka said hopefully. Khoka had heard a lot about it from one of his uncles who used to supply food to the soldiers. And he himself had met some American soldiers during his visits to Dhaka in 1942-43.

"I even chatted with them a few times," he said casually to his cousins.

The soldiers often sold small items in exchange for Indian currency which they needed to buy a bottle of rum or some personal item. The locals were delighted as they had never seen such items before. "And sometimes, we would simply pick up stuff they discarded. Remember, that cigarette lighter which clicked on and off?" he asked turning to Sarat.

Sarat nodded. "Yes, I remember!"

"I found it lying around, so I picked it up and asked one of them what it was. He showed me how to use it and told me that I could keep it, but should not use it," Khoka smiled.

They decided that with such exciting possibilities it was worth staying another day there.

"Let us first go to the village and get our stay and food organised," Nimu suggested.

The village was barely a cluster of small huts and the boys asked the workers there about the possibility of staying there, explaining to them who they were.

Sarat took one of the workers aside and asked if a Bengali family was around.

There were! In fact not one but nine Bengali families who had come all the way from East Bengal and lived in the village much to Sarat's delight.

As Khoka and his friends enjoyed a sumptuous dinner of fish curry, rice and brinjal fry, they wondered how these poor people could afford such good food. They were sitting in the hut of Balai, one of the Bengali workers on the site.

"That's because whatever we earn we spend on food, there are few things that we really need. In any case, we don't have to buy fish here since the river offers a plentiful supply of it," said Balai.

"Will we get to see the American soldiers pass, Balai Kaku?"

"Yes, I suppose so. The convoys cross the bridge every night. If you want to see them, you'll have to stay up the night, close to the bridge."

As dusk fell, the bridge was cleared. After what seemed to be an eternity, huge vehicles trundled on to the bridge but the moment they got on to the bridge, the headlights were switched off, so as not to attract attention to the convoy from the air. They stopped at the village and the men got off, demanding food and water.

"This happens every night. They take a lot of food and grains from us and if we don't give them, they threaten to shoot us," said Balai. The soldiers bathed in the river and some of them opened bottles of beer and rum, talking loudly and laughing.

When the boys woke up the next morning, the convoy had left and only the remains of the previous night's revelry indicated that it had actually passed through.

The next stop on their trip was Kodarma and Khoka wanted to continue on their way instead of going into Barhi town.

The others agreed and looked at Balai.

"You have to cross this very bridge to reach Kodarma. Why don't you visit Barhi town which is just an hour away?" suggested their host.

"I think we'll leave right away. We have a long way

to cover." Gopal answered on behalf of his friends. They thanked the villagers and set off towards the famous Mica mines of Kodarma.

The entire Hazaribagh district was famous for its rich mica reserves with the dust scattered all over the area around their house like a film of gold, but they had never seen a mine. On the way, they came across small villages scattered here and there. The closer they got to the mines, the less the vegetation became as the terrain got rough and the green plains and Sal forests gave way to the red gravel of the plateau.

They reached Kodarma mines within a couple of hours. It was spread over a vast expanse of rocky terrain and with the sun beating down fiercely, the region looked barren and desolate.

"Do you think we can go down to the mines?" Khoka wondered aloud.

"I don't think that'll be a good idea," Alok was quick to reply. ``It might be dark and damp. What's the point?"

"My dear cousin, mines are normally situated under the earth, in case you didn't know, and it is always dark and damp under the surface," informed Sarat gleefully to a shocked Alok.

"If you don't want to go, wait outside." Khoka suggested. And, before Alok could protest, the boys had left him there and proceeded to enquire how to go down to the mines. But, much to their disappointment, they were refused permission since they were too young and unaccompanied by an adult.

"We cannot take the responsibility, in case of any accident."

"It's okay. We'll say we went on our own. Moreover, there might not be an accident," Sarat argued.

The manager shook his head. "No, no. It's against the rules, I'm sorry."

Crestfallen, they returned to where Alok was waiting for them. He was happy to hear that they had been refused permission to go down into the mines. Just at that moment, the siren blared announcing the change of shift. They waited to see the iron shaft arrive from below, carrying a batch of miners whose work shift was over and who emerged black as soot. A fresh batch went down. The men who had come up, washed themselves of the grime and mica dust that had stuck on them, after which they settled down for their frugal meal, some joking, others silent. Once their meal was over, they walked in a single file to collect their daily wages of a few coins from the overseer.

Without getting permission to go underground, there was nothing much to be seen there. They stood around and saw mica being loaded into wagons to be taken to the factory for processing.

Disappointed, the boys left and by evening, had reached the river. They were quiet on the way back as they were both tired and hungry.

"Where do we stay tonight? There is nothing here!" said Sarat with barely concealed irritation. Khoka knew he blamed him for the futile trip.

"At Jhumri Tilayyia! That is the closest town." Khoka decided on behalf of everyone. He was well acquainted with the place, from having heard the stories about the place from his uncles.

He felt lucky to be living in a big joint family at both his paternal and maternal grandparents' houses. His uncles and cousins helped fill some of the void left by the absence of his father. Looking at his cousins now,

Khoka felt grateful for their company. Without them he would have been really lonely, he thought, with just an older sister for company whose interests were entirely different from his. He felt a sudden rush of affection for all of them.

Jhumri Tilayyia was more like a big village than a town. There were a number of big mansions and bungalows. The boys even saw some big cars go past them. These must have belonged to those who made their fortunes from the mica mines of Kodarma. The miners who worked in mines also lived in this town.

"Look! A Porsche!" exclaimed Sarat who secretly wondered if he could get a lift back home.

"They probably belong to the mine owners," Khoka said and then cried excitedly, "Look! There's a light around that corner. Let's go."

The light came from a small tea stall where a few people sat around in charpoys, eating and chatting. The night was hot and the sky was clear. The owner suggested a local *dhaba* for their dinner.

"So much for a Bengali house!" Sarat snorted. He was angry at Khoka for bringing them here in a hurry. What would have been lost if they had stayed another night at Barhi? Fish curry and rice would have been available in plenty there.

Besides, he was hungry and did not quite relish the idea of *chapati* and *dal,* which he assumed, was what the people here ate. But, he was in for a surprise. The food that was laid out in front of them was delicious. A kind of bread, yes, but made of *Chhatu* or *sattu,* accompanied with a sweet and syrupy liquid made from mango nectar.

"It's called *aamras,*" informed the *dhaba* owner. It

doubles up as both an accompaniment with your rotis, as well as a dessert. But, it is available only in the season of mangoes."

"Remember, last year you won the mango contest?" Nimu reminded Khoka.

Khoka nodded in between mouthfuls of *sattu pakodas*.

"I had 14 mangoes! But, Chhoto Mama was a close second, with twelve." Khoka smiled as he remembered the crazy event.

"And thereafter, for the next few days, you were mostly found in the toilet," Sarat laughed. Khoka's smile faltered at the memory.

"And, guess what his prize was for winning the contest?" Sarat turned towards Gopal and Alok who had not been present at that event. "A basketful of mangoes!"

The boys laughed heartily as they prepared to turn in for the night. The next morning they quickly packed their belongings and hit the river bank once again. They pedalled along the Barakar, in single file, admiring the almost transparent water. As they rode southwards, the Khandwa hills rose on their left, overlooking the lush green plains below. They rode on for a while till they came to a clearing. They looked around hoping to find some settlements or signs of human habitation. But, the plains stretched for miles ahead and there seemed to be no civilisation nearby.

"Strange," Khoka muttered. "Pratap Kaku had told me that there was a village in this area."

Pratap Kaku, Mejo Mama's brother-in-law worked with the tribals. He had spent most of his adult life understanding the ways of various tribal clans and

worked towards their rehabilitation and development and fought for their rights.

He lived in the forests with the tribals as they did. He, therefore, had a fairly good idea of the jungle and countryside and knew exactly which areas were inhabited and which were not.

"Well, Pratap Kaku knows his jungles. He couldn't be wrong," Sarat observed. He had met Pratap Kaku a couple of times and was mighty impressed with the man's knowledge.

"I thought so, too," shrugged Khoka.

"Hey, something just went over my foot," Moloy jumped.

And, sure enough, they saw a small mouse scurrying away into the darkness, followed by another one."

"Mice!" Sarat said, excitedly. "There are people somewhere close by."

"But, nothing is visible for miles, except the hills, the river and the forest," said the others looking around them, sceptically.

"That's right. So, we go right into the forest," Khoka said.

"Have you lost your mind? It is almost dark. There would be lots of wild animals, especially leopards and bears," said Alok, as he gulped nervously.

"And, human beings. Are you all coming, or would you like to spend the night under the open sky with only fresh air for food? And, as for the wild animals, there is a chance that smelling six young, healthy boys in the near vicinity, they might relish the idea of a sumptuous feast," said Sarat, already off on his cycle, followed by Khoka.

Visions of hairy bears and ferocious panthers loomed up before Alok but more afraid of being left behind alone, he quickly set off behind the rest.

The hills were already casting their shadows across the plains and the sky was turning darker by the minute as they entered the forest. The vegetation comprised of Sal and Mohua trees primarily, but there was thick undergrowth as well. The boys made their way through the shrubs, while Alok looked around him nervously.

They had hardly gone on for five minutes when they suddenly came upon a cluster of about ten huts.

"Finally!" Khoka said mightily relieved. "I knew Pratap Kaku could never go wrong."

"So much for a village!" Alok said, almost sarcastically.

Sarat looked at Alok. He was tired and the cheeky comment made him snap, "Why don't you just go back home? You'll find more than just a village. There's an entire town."

Sarat couldn't get more caustic, thought Khoka and almost felt sorry for their visiting cousin.

"Leave him, Sarat *Da*," he said now.

As they approached one of the huts, they found its door half-open. They peered in. There was a lantern kept in one corner of the hut, which lit up the almost bare room. The room was unoccupied. They moved on to the next hut, but even that was empty.

"No one seems to be living here," Sarat observed, disappointed.

"There must be people around. These huts do not look abandoned. Besides there is the lamp," Khoka replied.

And before long, they did come across a hut which

was indeed occupied. Four women were sitting around a coal fire. There was something cooking in a huge pot, a little distance away. Three children played nearby. The moment the boys entered, the women looked up, alarmed.

"Is any one a Bengali?" Sarat asked in Hindi. Moloy dug his elbow into Sarat's side.

The women looked at each other. Two of them instantly suppressed their smiles. After a pause, which seemed interminable, an elderly woman asked the boys in Bengali what they wanted. Before anyone else could reply, Sarat quickly said that they wanted food and shelter for the night.

"We have lost our way in the forest. We are hungry and tired. Can we get a place to spend the night?"

The woman nodded. "China will bring you food and you can sleep here," she said pointing to the open area in front of their hut. It was remarkably clean.

The boys looked at each other. The place looked fine, but what was that about China?

China turned out to be a shy young woman in the group. She quickly got up and left the hut and another woman followed her. They both came back with big earthen pots, one filled with rice and the other with fish curry. They laid out some plantain leaves and served the boys silently. The children ate to their hearts' content. They were very hungry. But, Sarat managed to get in a question which had been nagging him for a while.

"Tell me Mashima, why is that girl's name China? It happens to be the name of our neighbouring country."

The old woman smiled. "She's my daughter, the eighth one. We didn't want any more children after her. In Bangla, *chai-na* means, do not want."

The boys looked at each other and burst out laughing. The poor girl was so terrified that she ran out of the hut and disappeared into the darkness.

Once their bellies were full, they fell asleep almost immediately after lying down. The next morning, someone shook them awake.

"Come with me to the river to wash up and then you can eat and leave," a gruff voice ordered. The boys blinked their eyes and looked around. They saw a man towering over them. Who was he and where did he appear from? There had been no sign of him the previous night. And, where were the women who had fed them last night?

Perplexed, the boys arose and followed the men to the river, rubbing their eyes, and yawning, not yet fully awake. In fact, they would have preferred to sleep a little more. But, obviously, their hosts were not too keen to have them around for much longer.

However, they were not sorry to have woken up, for it was a beautiful morning and the sight of a herd of chintals drinking water at the river cheered them up. The faint light of dawn was streaking across the sky. The hills, still dark in the first light, loomed up from behind and the crystal waters of the Barakar River flowed invitingly in its serpentine glory.

The boys bathed and having eaten and refreshed, left. It was the fourth day of their tour. As they were leaving, a packet was thrust into Sarat's hands by the man who had woken them up. Surprised, Sarat looked at him doubtfully.

"What is this?"

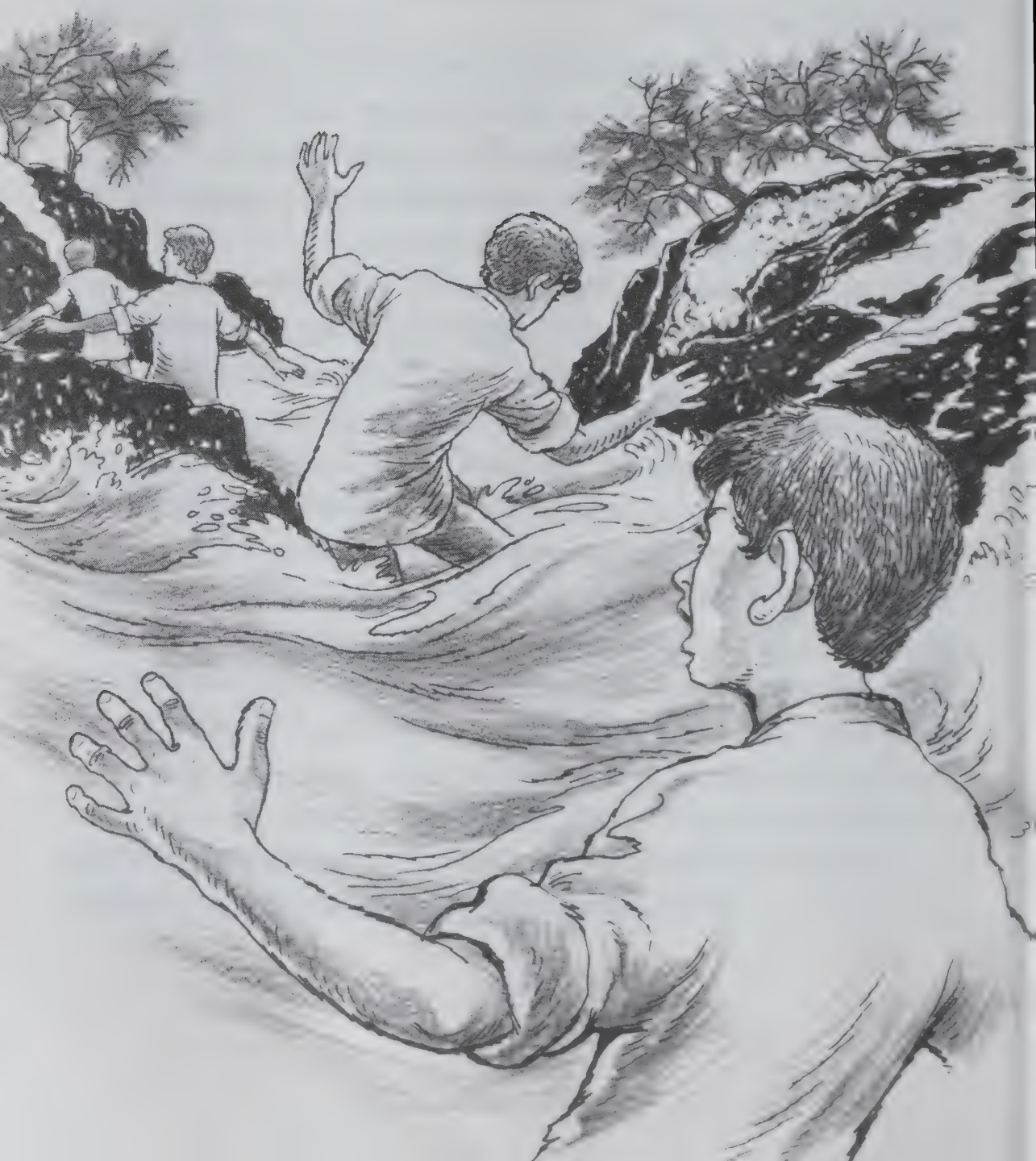
"Some food for you. Ma said you've been travelling for quite a while. You won't get anything for miles

ahead. This will see you through, at least for a day," the man replied.

The boys were speechless. Appearances could indeed be deceptive!

They thanked him and set off once again. After cycling for about 20 kilometres without a break, Khoka halted. The boys looked at him enquiringly.

"We have two options. Either we go along Barakar until we reach West Bengal or turn westwards towards Parasnath, Bokaro and Ramgarh." Khoka ran his finger



along the route he had marked in red on the map he was carrying. "Ramgarh is on the Damodar. So, we leave the Barakar trail and pick up the Damodar one," he continued.

"Better still, we climb up that hill and see where this river flows," Moloy suggested, pointing at a low hill which stood isolated from the rest of the range. The boys thought it was a good idea and cycled up to the hill. Leaving their bikes at the foothill, they began climbing it. It was not very high, but only once they started climbing did they realise how loosely formed it was. As they climbed, they could feel the stones and pebbles coming off and slipping from beneath their feet. With great difficulty, Sarat reached the top and pulled up the others, one by one. But once at the top, they realised it had been worth the effort.

"What a view!" Khoka exclaimed. Not only could they see for miles ahead across the plains, but also got a good view of the Khandwa ranges.

"So, what do we do?" Sarat wanted to know. "Do we carry on or go back into our state?"

"There is no point going along the Barakar any longer," Khoka observed. "It is beautiful, undoubtedly, but the landscape will continue to be much the same. Nothing else seems to be there. I suggest we turn inward, back into Bihar, towards the Parasnath temple."

Everyone agreed. They climbed down the hill and covered the short distance up to the river. Mountain streams are neither deep nor wide. It was easy to cross the river as the water was mostly ankle-deep. The water reached their knees only at one spot. Carrying their bikes on their shoulders, the boys slowly waded across the river, negotiating the slippery, pebbled river bed. Once back on the southern shore and worn out with the

effort, they threw themselves on the ground, exhausted. Mountain streams can be deceptive and tricky, even if they look negotiable before one entered them.

As they headed westwards, the landscape got increasingly barren, and the vegetation sparse. They were right in the middle of the plateau and the hills were completely brown. It was nearly dark and there were no signs of habitation close by.

"Do we have any food left?" Sarat asked. The boys shook their heads. They looked at each other. Since they had set off, this was the first time the boys were worried, and scared.

"No food, no shelter. Only hills, and rocks for company," Alok gulped hard.

"And, the sky and the stars and the moon," Khoka added and turned to the rest. "Do we climb up the hill to the temple?" Khoka pointed towards a dark hill that loomed up a little ahead, menacingly. But, there were lights flickering atop the hill. "Looks like temple lights," Khoka observed.

"That hill must be over 4,000 feet high!" Alok exclaimed.

"Yes, but we really have no choice. It's either the temple or the open sky. Make your choice, Alok Da," Khoka said.

"So, what do you propose?" asked Sarat.

"We can stay in the temple premises for the night," Khoka suggested.

"Are you mad?" Alok shrieked with terror. "It will take us the whole night to climb up the hill. We cannot cycle up there, can we?"

"I'll tell you what? We'll hire a car, or get a palanquin," Sarat said sarcastically.

Alok gulped.

"Alok *Da*, we are young, strong and God is up there. We will be protected," Gopal tried to bring peace.

Before Alok could reply, Sarat and Khoka started cycling, followed by Gopal, Nimu and Moloy. Alok had no choice but to follow. They cycled feverishly up to the foothills and hid their bikes in a thorny undergrowth close by. Then they trekked up, alternately running, resting and then climbing again. It was nearly dawn by the time they finally reached the hilltop and dropped at the temple premises, dead to the world.

The boys had barely closed their eyes when they were woken up by a man. He offered them food on a plantain leaf. "This is *prashad*," he informed them. "After you've eaten, you can wash yourself under that tap."

Awake by now, they looked around. The temple was magnificent. Jains considered it as one of their holiest pilgrimage centres. Twenty out of twenty four of the Jain Tirthankaras had attained their salvation at this spot and there was a shrine dedicated to each of them.

"These temples are really old!" exclaimed Gopal.

"Yes. Pratap Kaku told me they are nearly 300 years old. The idol in the main temple is even older as are the Sanskrit inscriptions," informed Khoka.

They bathed and ate the *prashad* and then went around the temple taking in the beauty of the architecture and marvelling at it. When they left it was past ten and the sun was beating down fiercely. They still had a long way to go. Getting down the hill was faster and once back in the rocky plains, they retrieved their cycles and were on their way again.

"To Ramgarh!" they shouted together, their spirits revived by their temple visit. The ride would take them

the entire day across the barren, desolate terrain, offering no refreshing break whatsoever. There were no streams across this particular stretch of land.

The whole day the boys cycled across the lonely, stark plateau, hungry and thirsty. It was well after dark that the river was spotted.

"The Damodar!" They screamed with delight as they approached the famous river. It was a sight for sore eyes.

Ramgarh was a big town and what was more, the boys had an address to which they could go to. Jaishankar Dutta was a distant relative of Pratap Kaku and the latter had sent a telegram informing him that the boys might contact him during their cycle tour. Mr Dutta, therefore, was expecting them. The house was big and Mr Dutta lived there with his wife and two daughters.

"Great!" Sarat exclaimed. "Finally, a roof over our heads."

"Well, except for last night we have stayed at places with roofs, haven't we Sarat *Da*?" Khoka smiled.

"Yes, yes," Sarat replied impatiently. "But, this is a proper roof, especially after last night, when we had to sleep under the open sky on an empty stomach."

Khoka was too tired to argue. Sometimes Sarat behaved like Alok in these matters, thought Khoka.

After a delicious dinner, the boys shared two rooms between them. This seemed very much like home after so many days of being out in the wilderness. They slept peacefully and nobody woke them up early. It was well past eight when the boys awoke and after a delicious breakfast of *luchis*, potato curry, brinjal fry and milk, the boys decided to go to the river bank.

"The Damodar is a big river and there is talk that

the government might come up with a dam project. If that happens, this river will assume national importance," Mr Dutta informed.

His words proved prophetic indeed. Within the next three years, the Damodar Valley Project had been commissioned on the Barakar, a tributary of the Damodar River. But the boys did not know it then and

for them, at that moment, the river proved to be a lifeline.

"How far are the Rajrappa falls?" Khoka asked his host.

"It's about thirty kilometres from here where the Damodar meets the Bhairavi."

They thanked Jaishankar Dutta and his family for their hospitality and left for Rajrappa. They followed the Damodar, enjoying their ride as the harsh terrain had given way to greener surroundings.

"Look, the Rajrappa temple!" Khoka exclaimed, suddenly. Everyone looked to where he was pointing.

"How do you know?"

"Pratap Kaku once again. He has visited this place many times. It is just as he described it," Khoka said excitedly.

"Let us first go to the temple. We still have time today. Then we can decide our next plan of action," Gopal suggested.

"Yes, yes, yes!" The boys were excited. This was perhaps the most beautiful part of their tour. This hill was not as high as Parasnath and the area offered an enchanting view being thickly wooded and punctuated with rocks and hillocks.

"Oh no!" Khoka stopped in his tracks.

"Now, what?" the boys asked nervously. For whenever he made some such remark, it meant there was some problem!

"Between us and the temple flows the Damodar. We will have to cross it."

The boys heaved a sigh of relief. "We thought it was something serious," Moloy said.

"But, this is serious. Do you think crossing rivers

and that, too, a river the size of Damodar without a boat, is easy?" Khoka asked, a little angry.

"We'll know soon enough," Gopal said.

The river was pretty narrow where they stood, close to its source. Yet, it was definitely more than just a trickle, unlike other mountain streams, since this was where it met the Bhairavi River. Bhera, as it was lovingly called by the locals, was a smallish stream, winding its way down the hills of Chhota Nagpur. The Rajrappa falls was not very rough, but quite forceful nevertheless. It would not be easy to cross it here.

"What about boats?" Alok asked. He had been subdued ever since climbing Parasnath hill, but this was a little too much for him.

The boys burst into laughter. Alok looked around him. Everyone was laughing, even Khoka. Nimu was actually rolling on the ground characteristically overacting.

"Boats? In a mountain stream? Alok, your school is in the mountains, for heaven's sake! You should know better!" Sarat snapped.

Alok was visibly embarrassed and decided the best thing to do under the circumstances was to shut up. 'Once I'm home,' he thought, 'I'll teach them all a lesson.'

"There are a few people over there. Let us see if they can help us across."

They cycled towards the group of men sitting on the river bank, chatting.

Khoka went up to them. "Will you help us cross over? We have six cycles with us. It might be a little dangerous to cross without help." The men nodded.

One of the men swept a glance over the boys and their cycles. "Do you really want to carry your cycles to

the falls and then up the hill? You'll have to leave them behind. And you won't even need them there," he said.

The boys were a little apprehensive about leaving their cycles behind. What if they came back and found them missing?

The men must have read their thoughts. "It is up to you. But, believe me; a cycle is of no use in that place. And as for help, the river is quite rough as you near the falls. It is a drop of 20 metres. You will need someone to guide you, in case you want to go to the base of the falls," one of the men said.

He left it at that, having offered the boys a choice.

Sarat was the first to speak up. "How much time will it take? We have to find a place to eat and sleep in."

"The round trip will take about one hour and if you decide to spend a little more time at the falls, it might be nightfall before you can get back," the man informed.

The boys looked at each other. Suddenly, seized with an inexplicable urge for exploration, Khoka snapped his fingers.

"Let's go. If it gets dark by the time we are back, we'll halt here for the night." He turned towards the men.

"Can we get some sort of shelter to spend the night?"

"You can stay in my house, if you don't mind," one of the men answered.

Sarat was disappointed that he was not a Bengali but knew better than to voice his misgivings.

So the little group, having left their cycles behind, and with the three men for company, stepped into the water drawing out their feet immediately. It was very cold! As they stepped on the stones, one by one, they

held each other's hands. They realised that the journey across the river would be thrilling.

The river took sharp turns throwing the boys off balance. Often to re-negotiate a turn they would have to get out of the water and on to the grassy, slippery bank. Then again, a few steps ahead a biggish rock would suddenly appear and they would climb over it and land right back into the crispy cold water.

"Watch out!" Khoka shouted as he saw Sarat tottering in front of him. "One missed step and we're gone," Khoka warned.

But, having grown up amidst hills and mountain streams the boys were not really scared. As they neared the falls, the river got rougher and more and more slippery. After about half an hour of rocking to and fro, the falls were finally visible.

Although these falls did not match the height of the Himalayan waterfalls, the force with which they gushed was tremendous. Roaring and spitting, the falls cascaded down the hillside to hit the river below, and then suddenly grew gentle as though reined in.

"I'm getting into the water. Anyone coming?" Sarat asked as he threw off his clothes and bag on a rock and jumped into the river. "It's pretty cold," he grinned through chattering teeth.

Not to be left behind, Khoka followed and the two of them were soon joined by the rest, including Alok. They splashed the ice-cold water at each other, laughing and shrieking with joy. After about half an hour of frolicking in the water, they finally came out and threw themselves on the green grassy bank, much to the amusement of their guide. All this while, their guide sat watching them and laughing, enjoying the sheer

naturalness of the unconstrained and unbridled joy of the children. It was so infectious that he too, after a while joined them and forgot all his troubles. At least, for now.

The boys stayed over for the night in the house of their guide Suman. He regaled them with stories of wild animals, especially bears and *sambhars*, which were often spotted in the forests around.

"By the way, have you heard of the Subarnarekha?" Suman asked.

"The golden river?" asked Khoka. "Isn't it rumoured to have gold dust on its bed?" The others looked at him in wonder. 'How does he know so much?' wondered Sarat.

Suman sighed. "Yes, the golden river!"

"But, has gold been found?" Sarat asked.

"Not that I know of. As the story goes around these parts, many years ago, a group of three Englishmen had dug gold from its bed when the river had run dry. But, I have never known this river to dry up in my lifetime. If you go towards the south, you will come across it. Are you interested?" the man asked.

Sarat spoke on behalf of the rest. "We are, but we are running behind schedule and should be turning back. Our parents would begin to get worried. Next time, perhaps," he smiled.

They set off at five in the morning the next day; ready for their journey up the hill on which was located the legendary Rajrappa temple. It proved to be a steep climb, but they did it in a record time of 45 minutes as they were greatly refreshed. The temple of Goddess Chhinamastika, or the one with the severed head, welcomed them at the top. There were quite a few people at the temple, even at this early hour.

They looked at the idol of Chhinamastika.

"The headless one!" The boys echoed in chorus.

"Who is that under the deity?" Sarat asked, knitting his brows together in an attempt to make out the forms.

"It is a lotus bed on which lie Kamdev and his wife Rati," Khoka said having been well-briefed by Pratap Kaku. "And of course, we all know of the other story."

"Which one?" Nimu wanted to know. He was now in a hurry to get back home, tired and exhausted, the wanderlust having been satiated long before the others. But, although eager to finish off the tour, his curiosity got the better of him, each time they reached a new place.

"As the legend goes, this was one of the places where a part of goddess Sati's charred body had fallen. Unable to bear the insult of her husband Shiva by her father, King Daksha, Sati, an incarnation of the goddess Durga had jumped into the sacrificial fire. When Shiva, who loved her dearly, learnt of Sati's death, he did the *Tandava* dance holding her charred body in his arms. As he danced bits of Sati's body fell all over the earth. According to local legend, this was one such place where a piece of Sati's body had fallen," Khoka rattled off the story he had heard from Pratap Kaku.

"Oh, so this is a Sati *peethsthan,*" Sarat exclaimed.

They went around the temple three times with reverence. By the time they climbed down and got back on the plains, it was well past noon. They ate what their guide's wife had packed for them on the way to the riverbank where they had left their bikes. They were apprehensive. Would their bikes be still there? If not, then how would they manage? Khoka was the first to spot the bikes. Overjoyed to find them still there, they

hugged their bicycles as though they had met a long lost friend.

Sarat turned around. "Where's our guide Suman *Da*?" They were sad at having to part with this extremely hospitable and helpful man. The sentiments were returned by him too since in the short time they had been with him, he had got attached to them. The boys gave him a rupee and thanked him for his help and company.

"Suman *Da*, how far is Hazaribagh from here? Any place where we can stop for food?" Sarat asked as they got on to their bikes.

"You will reach Hazaribagh only tomorrow evening. You can stop at Sariya village for the night," he replied.

The boys had started missing their home lately and hoped the journey back would be uneventful and quick.

By the time they reached Sariya, Khoka was running a fever as he had left on the journey immediately after recovering from one a week ago. By dusk, the fever was raging and the boys were worried. There was a doctor who told in no uncertain terms that he should not be out in the sun. "How soon can you get back?" he asked.

"It would take us at least another day, maybe even longer since we are on cycles," Sarat said.

"That would be dangerous for him, especially, on a cycle. Moreover, he needs someone to look after him."

"But, my mother is in Calcutta visiting relatives," Khoka informed weakly.

"Oh! In that case, it would be better that you go to Calcutta by train. That would save you the day long cycle journey, as well," he told them.

Sariya was on the way to the Hazaribagh Road station, and he told them that he would drop Khoka by

bullock cart at the station. He also offered to send a telegram so that someone could receive him at Howrah station.

Khoka boarded the nine o' clock train at the Hazaribagh road station. The women in the village packed some food for his train journey. He would reach Calcutta by five in the morning.

"The telegram might not reach," Sarat remarked worriedly, as Khoka placed his bag on the berth.

"It doesn't matter. I think I'll manage to reach our house in Calcutta. I'm sure after I've rested through the night, I'll feel much better."

And, with that Khoka left for Calcutta, feeling both sorry and guilty of having had to leave his cousins and friends in the middle of nowhere. The rest of the boys were even sorrier to see him go as they would miss his cheerful company and a great guide on their journey back. Besides they had to find a way to get his cycle back home.

Khoka recuperated in no time once he was in Calcutta, with his mother beside him. He forgot all about his fever, the strain and the stress of the journey. What remained in memory were those seven delightful days of the tour when they had all experienced complete freedom and oneness with Nature.

* * *

Prahlad closed the diary and looked at his mother intently. She pretended to be flicking off a speck of dust from the cushion. Prahlad could see that his mother would be more amenable to his idea. And he would persist till he succeeded.

It was his turn to say, 'Thank you Khoka!'

* * *

7

Prahlad's mind was filled with questions. Though he liked history, what was taught to him in school left big question marks about a lot of things. He loved reading about the men and women who had shaped his present world.

Indian history was of particular interest to him, especially, India's struggle for freedom. He had many questions. He would often go to the school library and browse through books written on eighteenth and nineteenth century India. But, most of them were routine stuff. The answers he sought were not there. Restless, he would return home and instinctively pick up his blue diary and read through it. The diary was like an oasis for Prahlad. It quenched his thirst for knowledge, for information. The one about Subhash Chandra Bose was his favourite. He must have read it many times over. It gave him a feel for the times, as seen through Khoka's eyes. He felt inextricably part of Khoka's life, without being able to say why. All he knew was that like him, there had been another boy who had many questions for which he sought the answers.

He had recently read the chapter about the members of Kallicharan Bose's family. In that too he had found the part about the case of Setu, who having been sentenced to death, had been defended by Khoka's grandfather, although without success. It told Prahlad about the actual conditions of the poor Indians who lived almost like slaves in their own country.

Looking at Prahlad's preoccupied look and the diary in his hand, Malati asked him, "You have a history exam tomorrow don't you?"

Prahlad nodded absent-mindedly. "Mom, had Khoka met any historic figure? I mean someone who had actually changed our lives?"

"Oh yes. Remember me telling you about the intellectuals and scholars who came to their house in Giridih? It was only by listening to them that he came to know of various landmark decisions and events in the country's history," she replied.

"But did he meet someone?" asked Prahlad.

She did not reply directly. "Have you heard of Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose?" she asked.

"Oh yes! The scientist! He had discovered that plants have life, hadn't he?" Prahlad was excited.

"Yes, and much more beyond that," replied Malati.

"Did Khoka meet him, then?" Prahlad began flipping through the pages of the diary trying to find that part when Khoka had met Jagadish Chandra Bose.

"He did, but he got the chance to meet him only during the man's last few days of life," she said, adding, "Here, let me find the page for you!" as she took the diary from him.

"Mom I am beginning to think that I know who Khoka was," said Prahlad with a frown on his face. Malati looked up but didn't say anything. She just smiled. "Hmmm . . . ."

* * *

Whenever Khoka went to the Usri River either alone or with his cousins he admired the big houses by the riverbank. He would make a mental note to ask some elder but by the time he returned home the day would have been so filled with adventures of various kinds that he would have forgotten all about it.

One day Ajit *Da* was there with them when they went to the Usri and Khoka remembered his question.

"Who lives in those houses, Ajit *Da*?" he asked pointing.

"Oh, those! Well-to-do and famous people from the cities come and build houses here to spend their holidays and vacations. They are also used for recuperating from illnesses since the air and water are fresh being close to the river and mountains," he replied.

Khoka felt very proud of his little town. Imagine all those rich and famous people of the big cities selecting this little town, his town, tucked away in one corner of the country, to build their houses!

"Do you see the white house with the red roof? It belongs to Shivram Chakravarty," Ajit said.

"Who is Shivram Chakravarty?" Sarat asked.

"He is a children's writer. Have you read any of his books?" Khoka replied. He had several books by the author.

Sarat shook his head.

"Remind me to lend you one when we return home."

"And, that house you see with those two trees on either side of it?" Ajit went on.

The boys nodded.

"It is Dawasika Bhawan, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's house. It was here that Tagore wrote Shivaji Utsav, in 1904," Ajit told the boys. "Come with me, I'll show you something." He led the two boys down the road and turned the corner.

"Look there; do you see that big house with the garden? That belongs to Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose."

"The scientist who proved to the world that plants have life? He lives here? Really, Ajit *Da*?" Khoka asked incredulously.

"Yes. Do you know that he was also the first man to invent the wireless?" Ajit asked them.

Sarat turned towards him. Surely Dada could not be wrong.

"Wasn't it the Italian scientist Marconi who invented the wireless?" he blurted out.

Ajit smiled. "As a matter of fact, that's what the Western world thinks. But it was Sir Jagadish Bose who had worked on the existence of wireless waves as early as 1885, much before Marconi did. Bose had already worked on devices for receiving the polarisation of electric waves. It was he who invented the first receiver for transatlantic radio communication. He is sometimes recognised as the Father of the Radio. But, he was not interested in its commercial value. This fact was later exploited by Marconi."

Khoka was disturbed to hear this. "But, isn't that a sort of cheating?"

"Well, it can be termed so. In fact, when Bose experimented on the response of plants to external stimuli after exploring the electrical responses in animal tissue and inorganic substances to various kinds of stress and strains, physiologists persuaded The Royal Society of Physicists not to publish his papers."

Sarat was shocked to hear this. "Why not?"

"They were scared that his new theories would upset the old ones. In short, they felt threatened and that, too, by an Indian. My dear boy, they ruled over us. Why would they recognize and accept our achievements?"

"But, why does the west underrate us so. It's not fair!" Khoka burst out.

Ajit nodded slowly. He was well read and

knowledgeable. He now said, "Knowledge means awareness. And, awareness is power. If they allowed it, the colonies might begin resisting their power over them."

"But, he has been honoured by the Royal Society," Sarat said.

"True, but only in 1920, almost thirty years later. He's the first Indian to have been honoured by The Royal Society in the field of Science. He is truly a genius, but remains one of our greatest unsung heroes. He is totally dedicated to the cause of Science, without any greed for power or wealth."

Khoka, shaken with this information, pondered over it long after the discussion was over. He tried to find out more about Jagadish Bose. He collected whatever information he found in different places, from newspaper clippings to discussions among the elders in the family.

A few months later the town was agog with activity. Khoka was curious to know what it was. So when Sarat walked into Khoka's room one morning to borrow a book, Khoka accosted him.

"Sarat *Da*, what is happening in town?" he asked.

Sarat tried to act the older brother and behaved in a patronising way with his younger cousins trying to show his superiority over them. But Khoka was not easily put off.

"Sarat *Da*, what is happening in town?" he repeated.

"Don't you know? Jagadish Bose is in town," he said nonchalantly.

"Jagadish Bose?" Khoka asked incredulously. For a few minutes, he was rendered speechless as the information sank in. They had been talking about him

just sometime back. Suddenly, he leapt up, turned on his heels and sprinted out of the room.

"Where are you going?" Sarat shouted after him, a little unnerved at Khoka's sudden reaction.

"To meet Jagadish Bose," Khoka shouted back.

It was ten in the morning and it being a Sunday, school was closed. But, for once Khoka wouldn't have minded missing school if it meant that he was to meet Jagadish Bose!

He ran towards the house that Ajit had shown him just a few weeks earlier as fast as he could. How he wished he had known about Jagadish Bose's arrival in town earlier! What if he had come and gone? What if he was about to leave? As he approached the house, he noticed a lot of activity. Some people were running in and out of the house, others waited outside the main entrance of the bungalow. Khoka wondered what was happening. He wanted to ask someone, but was scared he'd be shooed away. After all, unaccompanied children were not entertained by themselves and that too in the house of a famous personality. But, Khoka wasn't going back without meeting Bose. If a meeting was not granted then he would try seeking an appointment for a future date.

He stopped short of the main gate.

Khoka turned to a young man, dressed in a black suit and a blue tie and who looked friendly. Khoka was a little scared of elderly gentlemen; especially those dressed in a *dhoti* and *kurta*, and would be even more intimidated if they carried a walking stick. Visions of all the men who mattered in his life would loom up: his grandfather, uncles, and teachers. Men who mostly scolded him and were always preaching him about the how and why of everything.

Feeling a little comfortable, he turned towards the young man and asked him what was happening.

"Sir Jagadish is very ill, don't you know? He will probably not live through the night," the man replied sadly.

The news was so shocking and sudden that it took some time for it to get absorbed and then Khoka was stunned. After a long pause he managed to ask in a small voice, "Wh . . . what's happened to him?"

"He has been ill for a while now and was brought here in the hope that the fresh air of the country would revive him," replied the young man.

"Can I not meet him?"

"He is ill, don't you understand, child? Nobody is allowed to meet him."

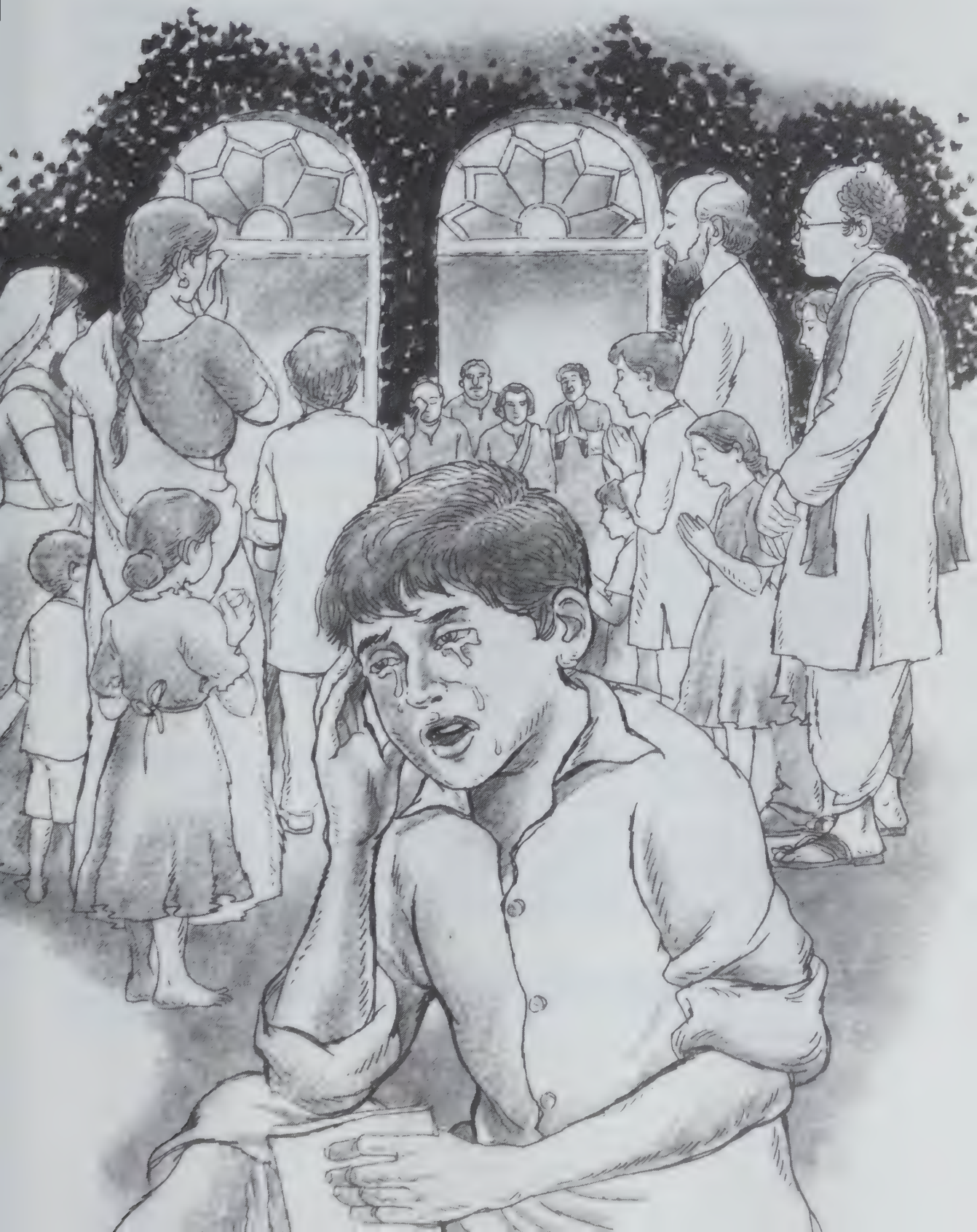
Crestfallen Khoka made his lonely way back home. To his overworked imagination, everything seemed still and sad. The leaves and plants seemed to be mourning the impending death of the man who had discovered that they had life and were meant to be loved and nurtured as much as other living things.

Khoka's steps were heavy but suddenly his spirits lifted.

"He's not dead. He's come here to get better. This is such a beautiful place. Surely, the country air would do him good and he would go back to Calcutta healthy and rejuvenated. And, before he leaves for Calcutta, I'm going to meet him," he told himself.

But, it was not to be. Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose breathed his last the following evening, in his country home built deep in the interiors of his beloved motherland, far from the glory that fame had brought him, and so rightly deserved by him.

Members of the Ghosh household decided to go over to the house to pay their last respects to a man who had come all the way to their town to leave the world. A special train was organised by the government of India by which thousands of people came to pay their tributes to him.



Suddenly, Giridih became important and wore a festive look. Only that there were no festivities, as each individual and the nation collectively mourned his death.

Khoka finally got to see him. Lying amidst innumerable wreaths and bedecked with his beloved flowers and leaves, he looked serene. Khoka burst into tears. Many others were crying.

"I wanted to meet you so badly. I wanted to talk to you. I wanted to be friends with you," Khoka wailed.

As Khoka was removed from the scene, and the family once again assembled outside the door, Khoka thought of what kind of a man Sir Jagadish would have been to have understood and communicated with the trees and plants.

"He's a lucky man," said Ajit. "It is believed that after you die, you merge with the ground beneath and become one with nature. Even after his death, he would continue to be with those he loved so dearly," Khoka nodded, wiping away his tears.

* * *

Prahlad listened on in sombre silence. His history book lay open on the table. For the first time, he realised how far removed he and those of his generation were from the people who were true sons and daughters of this country and who made every Indian, for generations to come, proud.

And, if it hadn't been for history, the world would never have known such people, smiled Prahlad.

And, if not for Khoka, Prahlad would not have heard the stories and remained largely unaware of such events.

"The Khoka stories would probably outlive history itself," he said.

"I'd rather say that they are part of history," laughed Malati.

8

"Prahlad, come on, or we will be late," called his father Rohit, who was waiting to lock the house after them.

"Coming Dad!" the boys rushed out, stuffing something into his duffel bag.

The family was off on a short trip to Nagarjunasagar dam, about 185 kilometres from Hyderabad. They were planning a half-day stay at the dam, followed by a visit to Ethipotala falls.

But, the part of the trip that Prahlad looked forward to the most was the steamer ride on the river Krishna, from the dam to Nagarjunakonda. An ancient Buddhist site, which today housed a museum and the ruins of a Buddhist monastery. As the single-decked steamer glided along, Krishna flowed underneath.

They had missed the last passenger trip which left at 2.30 in the afternoon and had to take the goods ferry. Huddled with the vendors and their baskets of chicken and all kinds of items, Prahlad and his parents now chugged along the river.

It was late afternoon and the sun was descending in the west.

"I'm glad we came for this holiday. It'll give all of us some time to spend together," said Malati.

Prahlad was looking at the river and its gentle waves as the steamer chugged on. The breeze was cool and the motion of the steamer was soothing.

"All rivers in South India are large and wide, aren't they Dad?

"But, they would surely not measure up to rivers like the Brahmaputra or Padma," said Malati.

"But, the Padma is no longer in India, Mom," he replied.

"I know. Today, it flows through Bangladesh. But, those days, it didn't. We were all part of the same country," she said.

"Well, I guess this ride would not be so eventful."

"As what?"

"As Khoka's steamer ride to Dhaka. It's a simple enough journey. Besides, we are not going too far," Malati replied.

Rohit smiled. "Malati, time for a story?"

"It would have been nicer if it were read out, so as to not miss out any detail. But the diary is at home," she said.

"Don't worry. I have it right here," said Prahlad opening his rucksack and pulling it out, much to the surprise of his parents. "I remembered seeing something about a steamer ride while flipping through it one day and so brought it along," he said sheepishly. It was now a family secret that he enjoyed the Khoka tales. He found the page and said, "Dad, it is the first time you are also going to listen a Khoka story."

His parents smiled at each other. Prahlad looked from one to another, puzzled and then shrugged and as he began reading.

"Khoka was once on his way to his grandparents' house in Dhaka in a steamer . . . ."

* * *

"We've run aground!"

Khoka woke up with a start to the voice of the captain. The steamer was still. "Please don't panic, we are doing all we can to get it going," he was telling the passengers.

What had happened? The cruise had started off without any hitch. Khoka wished he hadn't fallen asleep.

He had dozed off despite his efforts to keep awake. He had slept for a while during the night-long train journey from Sealdah station to Goalando situated on the Padma water front and woken up at three thirty in the morning. They were to board the steamer there, which would take them across the river Padma to Dhaka.

Khoka always waited for this moment. It gave him a thrill to run across the jetty and board the steamer in one leap. Depending on the water level at the time, the terminal point of the railway track would shift back and forth. The moment the train halted, Khoka, who had been waiting impatiently jumped off, followed by his mother, sister and aunt Saroja. He would cheerfully reply to his mother's warnings for him to be careful.

Khoka, like as anyone who had anything to do with East Bengal knew the river in its true avatar the *Kirtinasha,* or destroyer of the glorious past. He knew that in about half an hour when they would be well into deep waters, the river would gradually assume its menacing form, rushing on furiously. But, it did not bother him as he had taken the ride many times before and the journeys had been uneventful by and large.

It was the month of the famous *Kalbaisakhi*, the fiery April storms. As Khoka scrambled on to the deck of the huge steamer, a gentle breeze caressed his cheeks.

"It's quite windy, isn't it Saroja?" Labonya asked her sister-in-law.

"It's not really windy Didi. Perhaps, a little breezy. These early morning trips are usually quite cold."

Labonya continued to feel a little uneasy. The storm, in any case, never arrived with a warning. And, it usually raged in the late afternoons, lasted for a few

hours, destroyed a lot of things and just as suddenly abated. But right now, the sky was a bright azure, sparkling in the iridescent sunshine. It was a beautiful day, just the kind on which you would like to take a river cruise, thought Labonya.

Khoka, on the other hand, had better things to do than worry about the weather. Each time he embarked on the steamer, he could not help but marvel at the magnificence of it. It was several stories high and could carry up to 300 passengers at a time.

'It is no less than the Titanic, or for that matter, The Prince of Wales,' thought Khoka.

Once they had clambered up to the deck, Khoka's mother ushered the children towards the benches. They usually booked a cabin, just in case anybody wanted to lie down. But, the room was rarely used as everyone wanted to sit out on the deck.

Normally, Khoka would rush out to the deck, running across the length of the steamer to sit on the capstan and witness the magnificent sunrise over the river horizon. He never failed to exclaim at the dazzling scene unfolding before his eyes.

It was a seven-hour long cruise. Khoka liked to stroll around the steamer, even going to the catwalk in the engine room where the mighty crankshafts looking like gigantic horse-heads would be going up and down, steering the two giant propellers on both sides of the steamer. Now and then, Khoka would look up at the top deck wistfully, which painted in white, was a place occupied only by the Europeans, 'the masters'. He looked at the well-dressed children, playing and running around. He would sigh, knowing that the deck was out of bounds for Indians.

'If everything looks so good from here, how much more beautiful and different would they look from above!' he would often wonder but could never find out.

As Khoka looked around that day after being woken up rudely by the Captain, he knew something serious was afoot. There was a lot of commotion and people were running here and there. Suddenly, about half a dozen men rushed onto the deck, pulling huge iron chains along with them.

People cleared the centre of the deck. Khoka saw a line of worried faces of the white passengers peering down from the upper deck. It was a funny sight that made Khoka laugh.

"What's going on, I say? Why has the steamer stopped?" one of them enquired.

No one replied. In moments of crisis, the not-so-privileged ones cease to bother with such unnecessary proprieties as replying to the privileged classes. There was utter chaos everywhere.

"Ma, what is happening?" Khoka asked his mother.

"The steamer is stuck in the riverbed," Labonya answered as calmly as she could.

Khoka couldn't believe his ears. "A mighty steamer such as this, stuck in the riverbed?"

"Don't get excited. They are trying to pull it out," Labonya said, more to reassure herself than the others.

On hearing this, Khoka's youngest cousin Tublu burst into sobs. "Now, we won't get home."

A lot of things were tried, but nothing seemed to be working. Since it was not a ship, the steamer had no lifeboats to bail out the passengers. But, there were a

lot of fishermen in it and they were carrying with them crudely made wooden boats. More like rafts actually.

"They are so small. Besides, there are only three rafts," one passenger said, worriedly.

"These are not rescue boats. We'll be using them to help pull the steamer out. For that, three are enough," one of the fishermen replied.

"Which means they are not lifeboats?" Khoka asked.

"No," replied a man sitting opposite them. "Some men are going down into the river in these boats and attaching ropes to the steamer, they will try pulling it out."

Almost everyone knew it wouldn't work. Yet, there was no harm in trying. But, every attempt failed. As the day wore on and the sun got hotter, for in the East, the sun is well up by seven in the morning and can get real cruel by noon, people started fidgeting and getting restless. It was past two in the afternoon, almost five hours since they were stuck. The steamer stubbornly refused to budge an inch.

Almost all the British were now almost on the lower deck and had crossed the threshold of class. Suddenly there was a thud and the sound of breaking glass.

"What do you think you are doing, you native!" an Englishman shouted at one of the fishermen.

It was one of the Englishmen who had come down to get some water, carrying a flask and a few empty beer bottles when the fisherman had bumped into him. The poor man could not see the Englishman standing in the way as he was partly turned the other way trying to pull the heavy rope, with the result that both the flask and the beer bottles came crashing down, startling everyone present.

The European gave him a look filled with scorn, anger and hatred. Though momentarily shaken, the fisherman collected himself and without a word walked past him. The reason for inviting the wrath of the gentleman? The fisherman had bumped into him on

his way to the lower cabin. He was carrying enormously thick ropes which had been tied to the iron chains and which was the part the men held in their hands when they pulled. He had spent an hour pulling at the ropes already and was sweating and panting.

"Such a shameless man. Instead of lending a hand, he's abusing him," said Khoka angrily.

"Where are you going?" Labonya asked as Khoka rose suddenly.

"The man needs help," Khoka answered over his shoulder.

The fisherman shook his head.

"I'll manage, my boy," he smiled and sent Khoka back to his seat.

Tempers were getting frayed and abuses were flying thick and fast. The delicious chicken curry and rice, meant only for the Englishmen, had not yet been cooked as everyone from the cook to the captain was engaged in hauling the vessel up. No one thought of food, except perhaps the *sahibs* and the *memsahibs,* who for once, were being ignored.

As the afternoon crawled its way towards dusk and the sunshine turned mellow, people stopped screaming and shouting and a sort of calm settled on the steamer. Either it was plain tiredness or a resignation that comes with the knowledge of wasted effort. Everyone seemed to be drained of energy but strangely it brought them together in the kind of unity that binds people together in times of calamity, when the only thought is to get out of the situation.

"Ma, I'm hungry," Tublu announced.

Labonya suddenly realised that not just Tublu but the other children would also be hungry. It was very

late in the afternoon, nearly evening, and they had not had lunch.

Labonya turned towards Saroja. "I'd thought we'd be in Dhaka by now. The puffed rice and jaggery which we'd brought for breakfast is over. What do we do now?"

Saroja looked at her helplessly. No one had been prepared for this eventuality. There were some people who were carrying food with them. Perhaps they would share it with the children? Not knowing how long they would be stuck there, it was natural for people to put away whatever little leftovers they had. But after all, Tublu was a child. Labonya's mind was filled with conflicting thoughts.

All this was being witnessed by a little English girl, who must have been about the same age as Tublu. She turned towards her mother.

"Mamma, we have some cake and cookies with us. Why don't we give her some?"

Khoka was watching and listening to the exchange. The mother turned and pinched her daughter hard.

"Shut up, Alice!" she said under her breath, a smile fixed on her face. "It's for us."

"But Mamma, we have an entire tin. Please give her some. She's my friend. I even know her name. It's Tublu."

The mother gave her such a withering look that Alice shut up and did not mention cakes and cookies any more. The lady then turned to Labonya.

"I'm so sorry, but they are all finished. My daughter loves them so much that she is forever eating them," she said with a hollow laugh.

Labonya smiled weakly and nodded. Khoka looked

at Alice. If she was forever eating cakes and cookies she should have definitely been fatter and not so thin, he thought. She looked at her mother in confusion. Why was she lying? She had been taught in Sunday school not to lie and to be kind to everyone. And here, her mother was teaching her the opposite – to lie and to be unkind!

Just then another woman sitting on the other side said, "Please, have these coconut *laddoos.*" She offered one to Tublu who popped it into her mouth right away. She was about to offer them to Khoka and the rest of them as well, when suddenly she withdrew her hand and lowered her head, her lips set in a thin line.

"I'm sorry, I forgot to tell you. I'm a Muslim. My name is Sabiya Ashraf," she said without raising her head. Labonya and Saroja were aghast. Their own child had eaten out of the hands of a Muslim! They would never be forgiven, either by their families, or by God. It was the ultimate sin! Sabiya looked very sad at that moment.

'Well, that makes two sad persons on either side of us', thought Khoka, who along with a few other passengers, had witnessed the whole drama.

'This Muslim thing is getting to be too much. First, I hear of it at home, and now, here,' he gritted his teeth, remembering the talk about his aunt Mili who had married a Muslim boy. Khoka was angry. There is nothing to eat and mother is worried about eating food out of a Muslim's hand!

"You don't mind eating food from the hands of Englishmen who also belong to another religion. They are occupying your country and heaping cruelties upon you and even refuse you food. You don't mind that and all you do is smile! And a good soul like Sabiya

Aunty who offers you food has to hang her head in shame. She is, after all an Indian. And, you are treating her like an outcast?" Khoka said animatedly, his eyes flashing angrily.

"You are too small to understand these things. Don't meddle in matters that don't concern you. Just do us a favour," Labonya said angrily. ``Don't tell anyone at home about what happened. Grandfather will be very angry. And, grandmother will not let us enter the house."

"I'm not too small. I'm thirteen years old. And besides, it does concern me. It concerns all of us. We are hungry. And, hunger knows no religion." Khoka retorted and before his mother could react, he turned towards Sabiya Aunty and smiled. He knew now why she had waited to announce her religion till after Tublu had eaten the sweet. She had known that the moment they got to know she was a Muslim; the poor child would not be allowed to eat the sweet. The kind woman wanted the little girl to eat first.

"Sabiya Aunty, will you please give me four *laddoos*? I'm older than Tublu, so I should get more than her, isn't it?" asked Khoka. Sabiya smiled, but threw an uncertain look at the adults.

"Don't worry Sabiya Aunty. When I'll tell my grandparents that you saved us from starvation, they will bless you." He didn't look at his mother's face. He knew what her expression would be. The lady offered all the children *laddoos*, as many as she had, and emptied out the tin. Alice got one too. Her mother looked away.

Before Saroja and Labonya could stop them, the children had popped the *laddoos* in their mouths. They were delicious, made from fresh coconut and milk.

The scene over the last half an hour or so brought to the fore the problem which was getting increasingly serious. It was looming up large before everyone. The sun was nearly setting and the steamer had run out of its stock of food. Water was aplenty though since they were stranded in a river.

As the sun dipped on the western horizon, a picture perfect panorama presented itself. Despite the grim situation, Khoka was awestruck by the spectacle. But, the beauty of the evening was overshadowed by the grimness of the situation.

What would they eat? It was nearly nine hours since they were grounded. Although they were closer to Goalando than Narayangunj, the port town near Dhaka, it was impossible to go back to shore and replenish provisions. God alone knew how long they would be marooned. Some of the passengers had fallen asleep; others sat still, looking vacantly ahead at the deep waters of the Padma River. No help was around or could be called out for. A couple of fishing boats were noticed, though, but they were too far out in the river. The river was so wide that it was possible that the boats would not come near them at all.

But, something was odd. There were very few boats to be seen that day. Normally, a river this size would offer a bounteous supply of fish and Padma was well-known for it, especially the *hilsa*. It was always a busy river, but that day there seemed to be no fishermen around.

Some passengers still had some food with them, which they had brought from home. They shared it with their fellow passengers. Others, who had brought jaggery and sweets for their friends and relatives in Dhaka,

started distributing them amongst the passengers. The Englishmen reluctantly but hungrily accepted the food they were offered. They rarely carried food with them as it was normally cooked for them on board the steamer. But nothing had been cooked that day.

"Alice, go and bring the tin of biscuits that we have in the upper deck and offer it to everyone please." It was her father who spoke the words. Her mother sat tight-lipped.

Khoka started. 'Oh, no! No one wants those biscuits,' he thought. But he found himself accepting a biscuit and a piece of cake from Alice when she offered it with the most endearing smile.

The sun finally went down in a kaleidoscope of colour but there was no sign of any help whatsoever and the darkness would only make matters worse. The passengers became restless once again, wrought with fatigue, hunger, anxiety and worry for themselves and their relatives waiting for them in Dacca, who would by now be frantic with worry.

All attempts at pushing and pulling the huge vessel had been abandoned, at least for the moment.

"There's a light out there!" someone shouted suddenly.

"Where? Oh yes, I can see it. In fact, there are quite a few of them," someone else replied, as everyone strained their eyes to see if it was true. And sure enough, far out in the darkness, a few lights flickered.

"They must be fishing boats," suggested Mr Martin, who was quite friendly and been a source of support to both the Europeans and Indians alike having pushed aside any racist bias he might have had. Hadn't he overruled his wife and distributed the biscuits?

"Fishing boats at this time? That is highly unlikely," Mr Dey, a passenger who had befriended Khoka's group ruled out the possibility. "But yes, those are indeed lights. Perhaps, people are looking for us. Well, at least, I hope so. " He folded his hands and looked up at the sky. His wife's jaw dropped in surprise as he was not one to seek divine help.

"Ma, look there," said Khoka pointing towards the dark waters. "We just might make it to Dhaka tonight!"

But, his enthusiasm was short-lived. For, as the lights neared, silhouettes of small boats bobbed in the darkness. The passengers were disappointed.

"What can a few more men do to haul out the huge steamer? What is required is some sort of mechanical help," said Mr Dey.

The boats were carrying villagers who had noticed the steamer standing still all this while and had guessed that there was a crisis. Moreover, the few fishermen who had been spotted earlier on the river had gone back and reported about the stranded steamer. Knowing that the passengers would be in need of food a group of them had set out with basket loads of food.

'At least, we are not drowning like the passengers on the ill-fated Titanic. And, this is after all a river, not the Atlantic Ocean,' thought Khoka cheering up. However, stories of Padma's ire, its ferocity and vastness flashed in his mind and caused some unease. So tempestuous was the Padma that the river was known to have annihilated the prosperous settlements of Bikrampur and Tarpasha divisions as it shifted course from time to time.

Looking at the stock of provisions that the villagers had carried in their boats, the passengers were

overjoyed. *Rosogollas*, date jaggery, which was so famous in these parts and so very delicious, *sandesh*, even *luchi* and potato curry were there in plenty. Usually, the villagers sold these to the steamer passengers, but this was not a normal situation. They refused the money offered by some passengers.

The passengers blessed the villagers as they hungrily ate the food, including the Europeans.

With the help of more lights and some food in their stomachs, the men decided to give one more try at hauling up the vessel. But it stubbornly held its ground.

The gentle breeze of the morning had been gathering energy over the last couple of hours. Nobody had paid much attention to it, too engrossed as they were with the problem at hand. With the night entering into its last lap, the winds began blowing with the might of a tempest, howling and wailing like a banshee.

"The *Kalbaisakhi*!" people screamed. "Oh no, this was all we needed!" Passengers hurried back to their cabins as fast as they could. No one knew what the storm would wreck in its fury.

"No wonder, there were so few fishermen around. They know whether it is safe to venture out or not," Labonya reasoned.

"But, the *Kalbaisakhi* blows only in the late afternoon, isn't it, Ma? And, it comes without a warning. So, how did the fishermen know?" asked Khoka, a little perplexed at the unusual happenings of the day.

"That's how it is usually. But, the weather in these regions is quite unpredictable. In any case, there was obviously some indication of this tornado, or the fishermen would not have stayed away. It could be just another storm, but all storms in these parts are dangerous and terribly destructive," Labonya explained.

Khoka peeped out of his cabin door. The wind slapped him hard on the face. He quickly withdrew into the shelter of the room, but managed to see basket loads of fowls and hens being swept away into the raging waters of the Padma. These were normally kept in the lower deck and were meant primarily for trade. Padma

was a major conduit for trade between India and the neighbouring countries, on its eastern border. The goods had to travel across the vast expanse of the Padma River. Boats carrying bales of jute from the fields of East Bengal to the jute mills in Calcutta was a common sight. At a time, eight to ten boats would be tied to a steamer and ferried across the river. In fact, it was at Narayangunj that the three mighty rivers, the Brahmaputra, India's longest river, the Meghna which flowed down from Assam and the Padma which flowed into the region from the west, converged.

"But, during the monsoons and in the month of the *Kalbaisakhi*, this traffic reduces. This time too it's no different," informed Mr Dey, who was sharing their cabin, not having booked one of their own.

The tornado brought about a lot of destruction in its wake. The mast was torn away from the steamer. A lot of cargo was swept away. A child had cut her head badly, as she lost her balance and fell on a broken piece of wood. The wound had been stemmed by a piece torn from someone's sari. A man had nearly gone overboard when he had bent over the railing to see if the ropes had been secured to the boats. A boat had almost overturned in the wild waters. Yet, thankfully, each time a possible casualty was prevented. But fear loomed large and no one knew when death would strike.

People prayed fervently, each in his or her own way. The Europeans could be seen kissing the cross; the *Quran* and the *Gayatri Mantra* were being recited.

Total strangers belonging to different castes, religions, classes and even countries, aided and supported one another as though they had known each

other for a lifetime proving that calamities often stir up previously unknown emotions, bringing out the best, and sometimes, even the worst in a man.

Each time the waves hit the sides of the steamer, it rocked. But, just a little. It was so firmly embedded that even the *Kalbaisakhi* could not dislodge it although many things in it were swept away.

"Well, thank God. If the storm had struck while the steamer was in motion, we would surely have died. Whatever happens happens for the best," said Labonya, folding her palms together and closing her eyes.

"But Ma, if the steamer had not got stuck, by now, we would have been in Grandfather's house in Dhaka, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes, I know," replied Labonya quickly, embarrassed at being corrected before the others.

Khoka nodded and didn't say anything further. He realized that he had unintentionally hurt her.

It was morning by the time the storm subsided and in the freshness of the morning air, the world looked more benevolent. Khoka looked around him. All seemed well and the world looked beautiful, except they were still stuck. It was now thirty hours since the passengers had boarded the unlucky *Ostrich*.

However, unknown to them, help was on its way from Narayangunj, where the steamer was to have terminated after the round trip. After a delay of about twenty hours, when *The Ostrich* still hadn't arrived at Narayangunj jetty, it was clear that the huge vessel was in trouble. Another steamer, this one called *The Emu*, was sent to help the *Ostrich*.

Meanwhile, the next steamer had set sail from Goalando and it encountered the unlucky one of the

previous day midway. Nicknamed *The Buzzard,* it tugged hard at the stubborn *Ostrich.* The passengers awaited the outcome expectantly, but were once again disappointed.

"This would perhaps loosen it somewhat," hoped Mr Martin. "Moreover, the storm last night would have prodded it quite a bit."

"Perhaps," agreed Mr Dey. "But, more force would be required to haul it out completely." Everyone hoped that by evening their troubles would end and prayed fervently for some miracle to happen.

The miracle arrived in the form of *The Emu.* The passengers were asked to board it as it would carry them across the river.

The Emu was adequately prepared to ferry the passengers across the rest of Padma to Dhaka, their eventual destination. All passengers collected their belongings and boarded the other steamer.

"What about this steamer?" Khoka asked one of the crew.

"We'll see to it later. Meanwhile, you get aboard and get on your way!"

This time they glided along without incident and reached Dhaka by dusk, or as it is famously called the hour of the *Godhuli,* when the cows come home, twenty seven hours late—tired, weary, hungry and completely worn out, but relieved and triumphant, as only the survivors of a calamity can be.

* * *

"Do you think this steamer may get stuck, too?" Prahlad asked hopefully, looking forward to an adventure.

"That is highly unlikely. But, then you never know.

Thankfully, there is no Kalbaisakhi *here," Rohit replied.*

Prahlad nodded absent mindedly. The waters of the Padma flowed before his eyes. He was not sitting in a launch which was travelling across the Krishna on its way to Nagarjunsagar, but was rolling along the waves of the Padma.

"I want to go to Dhaka by steamer. And, go all around Giridih and Hazaribagh on my cycle."

Malati's eyes were wistful. "Dhaka is no longer in India, and Giridih and Hazaribagh are neither peaceful nor as picturesque, as in the time of Khoka when Nature was still unspoilt," she said.

Prahlad sighed and shut the diary. He turned to his mother.

"Mom, who is Khoka?"

"Guess?" Malati replied with a smile.

The diary fell from Prahlad's grasp. "You mean Grandfather?"

"Yes! And, what you have been reading was written by him. And, the stories?"

"These are stories of his childhood, of his family, of your family and mine, of adventures and events that took place when he was a young boy like you."

"You mean, all that's there in the diary actually happened?"

"Yes, very much so. And, he wrote them all down in the form of a journal."

Prahlad picked the diary up from the dusty floor of the steamer, wiped it on his trousers and held it in his lap.

"No wonder! I always felt that I knew Khoka and knew him very well. Now I know why . . . ."

The steamer glided along the river Krishna. But, Prahlad was lost in the labyrinth of a bygone era.

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Born in 1959, **Partha Sengupta** obtained a Diploma in Applied Art from Government College of Art & Craft, Kolkata and started his career as an illustrator with Delhi Press. Thereafter, he switched over to illustrating books for children which became his passion. Partha has illustrated dozens of books for popular publishing houses viz Scholastic India, Cambridge University Press, UNICEF, National Book Trust, India and others.

This book is a compilation of stories, some short, some not-so-short, with Khoka as the common protagonist, who having lost his father at the age of three, is tossed amongst his many relatives, stretching from the plains of Bangladesh to the plateau of erstwhile Bihar. Despite this, Khoka grows up in an environment filled with laughter, fun and thrills. Khoka's life is a merry-go-round of adventures and there is a constant supply of excitement. It is these adventures and incidents which fill up the chapters as stories told by a mother to her son Prahlad, at a different time, in a different place.

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